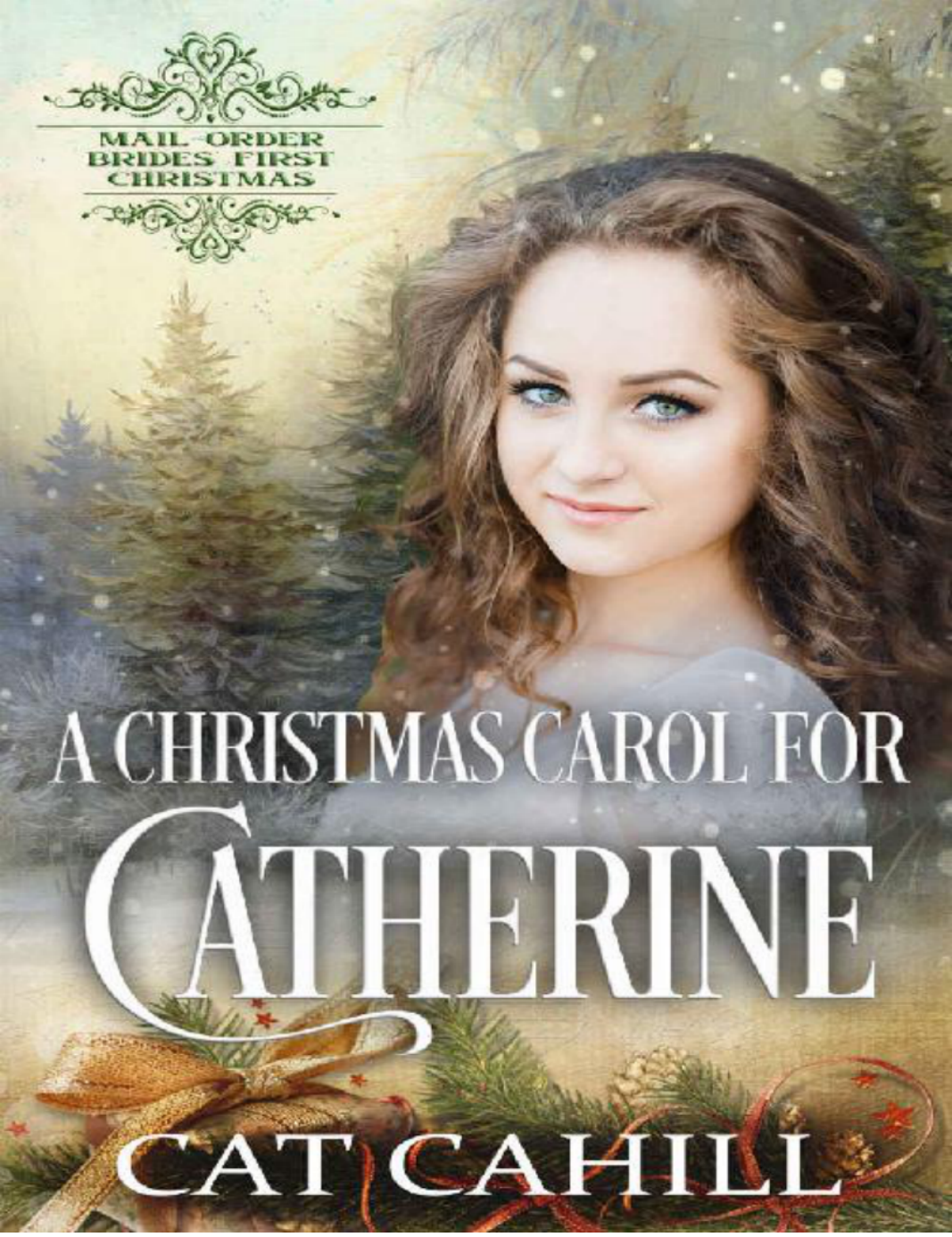

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CATHERINE
CAT CAHILL

A Christmas Carol for Catherine

Mail-Order Brides' First Christmas, Book 9

by Cat Cahill

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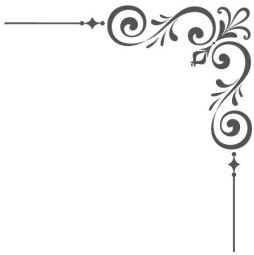
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Chapter One

ROLLINGS WOODS, TENNESSEE — Late Summer 1870

Harlan Lee had been in the ground less than twenty-four hours before the landowner came knocking.

Clutching the patched-together black skirts a neighbor had sold her for the price of a hen, Catherine, his widow, opened the door to her fate.

"You've got a week," the man said before spitting a stream of tobacco juice into Catherine's meager front garden.

"Please, Mr. Bennett. I need more time. I have no family nearby." Surely he would understand. It would take time for a letter to reach the only family she had, receive a letter in return, and then arrange to move her belongings.

Mr. Bennett eyed her with barely disguised contempt. "Two weeks. That's all. I've got a fellow wanting to move in here, a hardworking sort."

Unlike Harlan. He didn't need to say to the words. And by the set of his jaw, it was clear he'd give her no more time.

"All right," she said, trying to keep the tremble from her voice.

He nodded once and then narrowed his eyes. "You're better off." Then he gave another curt nod and strode away.

Catherine leaned against the doorframe, watching his retreat. She wanted to believe him, but it was nearly impossible right now. As terrible a husband as Harlan had been, at least she'd had a home and protection when he'd been alive. Now she had . . . nothing. That quick, guilty sense of relief she'd felt upon hearing of his death had been quickly squelched when she realized she had no means of support.

Catherine shut the door, blotting out the cheerful sunlight and shutting in the still, humid air. She didn't notice the stifling heat as she sat at her old, scarred kitchen table in the one-room house. Pushing back a curl that refused to remain pinned, the fears began to overtake her. What was she to do?

Another knock came at the door, this one softer and less insistent. Feeling as if she were lifting the weight of all her worries, Catherine pressed herself up from the chair and returned to the door.

"Are you all right?" Beth Hopkins, Catherine's nearest neighbor and closest friend, stood just outside, a basket in hand. "I saw that awful Mr. Bennett leave here."

Catherine swallowed, but the worry remained. "He gave me two

weeks to pack everything and find somewhere else to live."

Beth's face went from one of surprise to anger to determination in a matter of seconds. She gently pushed Catherine aside and entered the house. Setting the basket on the table, she pulled out the chair Catherine had recently vacated. "Sit," she said. "We'll figure this out."

Grateful to have at least one person looking out for her, Catherine shut the door and did as Beth said. The entire town of Rollings Woods knew that Harlan hadn't been the best husband, but only Beth knew the extent to which Catherine had silently suffered through his drinking, inability to keep up with the farm work, and the demons that still haunted him from the war. As much as she'd hoped for children, she sometimes wondered if the losses she'd suffered in carrying any to birth were for the best.

"Are your aunt and uncle a possibility?" Beth began unpacking the basket as she spoke. Catherine looked in wonder at all her friend had brought, but she shouldn't have been surprised. Beth had been like a sister to her from the moment they'd first met at church five years prior. They both loved to sing, and had spent many a moment together practicing the hymns and other beloved melodies. Catherine had never really allowed anyone to hear her sing, only Beth.

Catherine thought a moment, and then shook her head. "They've so much responsibility. I don't dare impose." The last she'd heard from Aunt Mary, her mother's youngest and only living sibling, they were barely hanging on to their own farm with seven children dependent on them for survival. "And Mama is still living with that family who took her in."

Beth pressed her lips together, clearly thinking as she placed a freshly-baked loaf of bread, a jar of preserves, and several other items in Catherine's cupboards. "Is there anyone else to whom you could write?"

"I have no other family." Catherine's voice cracked and she fought to keep her emotions under control. She'd hardly cried since Harlan had passed, and then only to mourn the boy he'd been—the one she'd fallen in love with years ago, before the war. She refused to cry more now, although Beth would certainly understand.

Beth shut the last cupboard door and turned to face Catherine. "How I wish I had more to give."

Catherine gave her friend a grateful smile. "You've done so much already." She could hardly expect Beth to invite her to sleep on the floor of their equally small home that already housed six people.

Beth's face lit up, and Catherine perched on the edge of her chair, ready to hear any feasible idea she had. "Have you spoken with Pastor Jeffreys? Or Mrs. Jeffreys? They may know of somewhere you could go."

“I did.” Catherine’s shoulders slumped. “Aside from becoming a mail-order bride to some lonesome man out West, they had no other suggestions.”

Beth swept into the chair across from Catherine. “And you wouldn’t consider that idea?”

“A mail-order bride? Of course not. Could you imagine marrying some fellow you’d never met? I’d likely find myself wed to another Harlan.”

“With a home and food and perhaps the possibility of children,” Beth added. “Although, yes, I can see how awkward it might be. However, it’s unlikely the man would be prone to drinking or visiting certain sorts of women if it’s something that’s arranged through the church, wouldn’t you think?”

Catherine looked down at her hands as she thought. What Beth had said made sense. And wasn’t she just thinking that while being married to Harlan had been joyless, she was at least thankful for the security it brought?

What if there *was* a possibility she could marry a better man and have a home and all she needed? She wouldn’t need to love him. In fact, it would be much better for her heart if she didn’t. He wouldn’t have the opportunity to break it, as Harlan had.

“Would you take that chance, if you were in my place?” she asked Beth earnestly.

Beth’s brown eyes looked pensive, and then she nodded. “Yes, I would. Particularly if it were almost certain the man was a good, Christian fellow. We might not fall in love, but at least I could depend upon him. Which is more than I can say for most men around these parts.” She paused. “And Catherine, you deserve a child.”

“I’ve had my chances,” Catherine replied, barely keeping the tremor from her voice. “At this point, I believe it simply isn’t meant to be.”

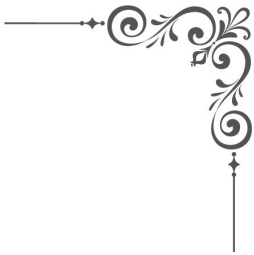
“You never know,” Beth said with a hopeful smile. “It may happen just yet.”

Catherine shook her head. “Would you come with me? To see Pastor Jeffreys?”

“Of course. Do you want to go now? I’m not expected home for at least an hour.”

It was now or never. And so Catherine gathered her hat and gloves and followed her friend out the door.

All that was left was to keep faith that Pastor Jeffreys had her best interests at heart.



Chapter Two

GROVER'S GULCH, COLORADO Territory, Fall 1870

The train was late.

It happened from time to time, particularly when it began snowing in the mountains. And this morning, the small mining town of Grover's Gulch had awoken to a blanket of white up high on the topmost peaks. The train had to cut through a pass in order to arrive in town, and snow often meant it had to stop while railroad workers shoveled the white powder off the tracks.

It was hard to imagine snow right now, standing here in the bustling little town as the sun shone down and made wearing a coat just a bit uncomfortable. Jonathan Clark shrugged his coat off and draped it over one arm as he looked down at the suit he wore. It was the only one he had, and it had seen better days. He'd only worn it to church services since arriving in Grover's Gulch that summer. Building and running a boarding house had offered little other opportunity to dress nicely.

Except now.

What would she be like? he mused for possibly the hundredth time. He'd pressed Pastor Simpson for information about this girl he was to wed, but the minister had very little information other that she'd come upon recommendation from a minister friend in Tennessee, that she was recently widowed and needed a home immediately, and that she was of an appropriate age to become Jonathan's wife.

Oh, and her name—*Catherine Lee*. It was a lovely, simple name, and he liked the way it would sound once she took his last name. *Catherine Clark*. It was almost poetic.

Jonathan shook his head as he looked down the empty tracks. He was hardly a man given to flights of fancy, preferring instead to concern himself with matters of business. Numbers and the like were dependable, unlike emotions. But ever since agreeing to marry this woman from Tennessee, he'd found himself drifting off into thoughts that were quite unlike him. Would she have brown hair or blonde? Was she fair-skinned or did she have more of an olive complexion, like himself? Was she boisterous and friendly or more reserved and demure? Considering she'd been married before, as that meant she wasn't likely to be painfully shy. He needed a wife who could make conversation with his guests, even if it was brief and simple.

Being married once before also probably meant she wasn't a homely creature, although he felt guilty about thinking such a thing.

Given that he was relying upon his pastor to find him a wife, Jonathan thought he shouldn't be so choosy. He needed the help of a wife, and he would marry her no matter how she looked.

There were so many things he didn't know about Mrs. Lee, and if he had to wait one more second to find out, he thought he might burst from the anticipation. And the worry.

No, the one true anxiety he had wouldn't come true. It couldn't. He was not the same man as his father, and he'd be a *much* better, more patient, and more kind husband, and—hopefully—a father.

The crowd had grown significantly on the platform for the delayed train. It seemed that half of Grover's Gulch stood here waiting for someone to arrive. Their depot wasn't much to look at—a barely finished ticket office and some hastily constructed benches along the platform—but it had been seeing the arrival of more and more people since its creation that previous spring. Most of the miners still arrived on foot or on horseback, too poor to pay for train fare, but their arrival had brought more business-minded men like Jonathan and, eventually, a few ladies. But most of those women who did come to Grover's Gulch were already married to husbands who'd arrived here first. Those who weren't usually came to provide services to the miners. Unmarried women of an upstanding nature were few and far between in Grover's Gulch, and Jonathan wasn't the first man to send for a mail-order bride. Or pastor-ordered bride, as was more accurate in this situation.

Almost as if it were answering his impatient thoughts, a white cloud of steam rose between the mountains, signaling the advance of the train. People pressed forward on the platform, and Jonathan said a prayer that his wife-to-be would be all he hoped.

It wasn't long before the train steamed around the last bend into town, sending plumes of white clouds into the bright blue sky. The wheels squealed against the rails as it came to a halt at the platform.

While most of those waiting took a step forward, Jonathan stepped back. He didn't know which car she'd arrive on or any sort of description of her looks. But he figured there couldn't be that many unaccompanied young women arriving in Grover's Gulch.

And he was right. Most of the passengers who emerged from the train were male. A few were couples, and there were a handful of women who were either far too old or far too wealthy-looking to be Mrs. Lee.

As he scanned those emerging from cars near the far end of the platform, something wrapped itself around his leg.

Jonathan startled, glancing down quickly. There, with short arms holding tight to his leg, stood a small boy.

"Hello," he said uncertainly. His experience with children was

nearly nonexistent, but he hoped that by acknowledging the boy's presence, he'd look up and explain what he was doing.

But that wasn't to be, because the tow-headed child simply held on and buried his face in the leg of Jonathan's trousers.

"Hello?" he said again, uncertain what to do next. He glanced up, hoping the boy's mother would come retrieve her son, but no one appeared to be looking in his direction. He skimmed the crowd again in the hopes he hadn't missed Mrs. Lee. Those on the platform had thinned out some as passengers and those they met slowly drifted away to wagons or destinations in town.

This wouldn't do. How could he meet his intended if this child wouldn't let him go?

"Boy," he said, cringing some at the way it sounded. It was what his father had called Jonathan and his brothers before he unleashed his anger upon them. "Son," he said instead. "Where is your mother?"

The spot on his trousers where the boy pressed his face had grown damp. The child was crying.

"Have you become lost?" he asked, the realization only just dawning on him.

The little boy's head moved up and down, but he didn't budge from where he held on.

"Do you need help finding your mother?"

Another nod.

Jonathan sighed. He couldn't help the boy if he continued clinging to his leg. "Why don't you let go? I'll help you."

But the child still didn't move.

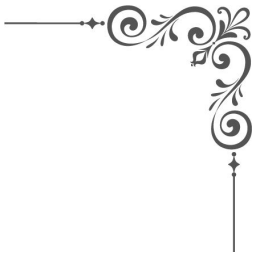
"Pardon me, sir," a female voice said.

Jonathan looked up to find a young woman with soft blue eyes, a well-worn travel cloak, and unruly curls that sprung in defiance from beneath her hat standing before him. She was so arrestingly pretty that when he opened his mouth to greet her, no sound emerged. He wrenched his jaw shut as the boy squeezed harder against his leg.

"I am looking for a Mr. Jonathan Clark. I don't suppose you might know who he is?"

This was Mrs. Lee. Jonathan blinked at her as if she were an apparition. How had he gotten so lucky? "I am he," he finally managed to say.

"Oh." Her eyes widened at his words. She glanced down at the child clinging to his leg. "My pastor didn't mention you were a widower."



Chapter Three

MR. CLARK STARED AT her, apparently dumbfounded at her words. Perhaps he'd interpreted them to mean she didn't care for children?

"I do love children," she added. What a way to start off, making him think she was appalled that he had a son he expected her to mother. It was surprising, yes, and certainly unexpected, but she would hardly decline a marriage that came with a child. Especially when the little boy holding tight to Mr. Clark's leg looked as sweet as pie.

"Hello," she said softly, lowering herself to her knees to meet the boy at his level. "I'm Mrs. Catherine Lee, but you may call me Catherine. What's your name?"

The boy turned slowly, prying his face from Mr. Clark's trousers to look at her. His cheeks were patchy red from tears and a little smudge of dirt ran across his chin. She hid a smile at the thought that more dirt had likely made its way from the rest of his face to his father's trousers.

"Rex," he said in a quiet voice. He was maybe three or four, Catherine guessed, and had the round face and light hair of a little cherub. For a second, her heart ached. One of the babies she'd lost would have been about the same age.

She put a hand to her stomach, just briefly, before pulling it away. It was no use hoping this time would be different. She'd only hoped it would happen before she left for the Colorado Territory, but that, apparently, wasn't to be. And now she had unplanned news to share with Mr. Clark.

As a father himself, perhaps he'd be more amendable to the idea.

"He spoke," Mr. Clark said in wonderment as he looked down at Catherine and the boy.

She gave him a puzzled look.

"The boy isn't mine," he clarified.

"Oh. Oh!" An unexpected feeling of sorrow coursed through her. How silly, to feel disappointed in this revelation when she'd certainly never planned on it to begin with. "Then how . . .?"

"He appeared out of the crowd and grabbed on to me. All I know is that he's become separated from his mother."

"Well, in that case, Rex, we must find her." Catherine held out a hand to the boy, and after staring it at for a moment, he took it and detached himself from Mr. Clark's leg.

"How did you do that?" Mr. Clark asked as Catherine straightened,

little Rex's hand clutched firmly in her own. "He wouldn't let go for anything before you arrived."

She gave him a smile before searching the people before them. "Rex is a big name for a little boy," she said to the child. "I imagine it means you'll grow up to be very strong."

The little one grinned. "My papa says that."

"Well, then it must be true." She looked through the crowd again. A man in a long coat stepped aside, and there, just past him, stood a women in a working dress and apron looking fitfully about the platform. "Is that your mama?" She pointed at the woman.

"Mama!" Little Rex cried out, tugging on Catherine's hand.

The woman heard him immediately and came running across the platform. Rex ran into her arms and she held him close. Catherine's heart pinched. When it seemed—for just a few moments—that she might finally get to be a mother, those old familiar feelings of loss were right there waiting when that dream was dashed again.

It isn't meant to be, she reminded herself, pressing her tongue against the back of her teeth to push away the tears that stung her eyes. She ought to be happy about reuniting this boy with his mother, not crying over the fact that he wasn't Mr. Clark's to begin with.

"Thank you," the woman said breathlessly. "He got away from me across the road when I was distracted. He loves the trains, so I knew he'd come here. Thank you so much for taking care of him."

"You're welcome," Catherine said. Seeing the boy glance up at his mother with all the love in the world filled her heart with joy and chased away the feelings of disappointment and grief.

"I'm Mrs. Lowry," the woman said. "We've only just come to town, but please let me know if you ever need anything."

"Jonathan Clark." The man beside Catherine finally spoke up. Now that she wasn't distracted by Rex, Catherine could appreciate the low timbre of his voice. It had a musical quality, one that reminded her of the baritones in church back home in Rollings Woods, and she briefly wondered if he loved to sing as much as she did. "I run the new boarding house. This is Mrs. Catherine Lee."

Mrs. Lowry nodded at them both. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I hope you'll excuse me. I need to get this little one home for a rest."

They bid Mrs. Lowry goodbye, and then Mr. Clark turned to Catherine. He held out a hand for the carpetbag she carried over her shoulder and she gratefully handed it to him. "Have you a trunk?" he asked.

Her face colored. "I don't." Her meager belongings—the ones she could carry to Colorado—had all fit into the large carpetbag. But if that surprised Mr. Clark, he didn't show it.

He crooked his arm, and she wrapped her own around it. She

couldn't remember the last time Harlan had shown such a kindness, and she reveled in how secure it made her feel to walk alongside a man in such a way.

"I've spoken to the minister," he said as he led her off the platform. "He is available to marry us tomorrow evening. If that suits you," he added, an uncertain tone to his voice.

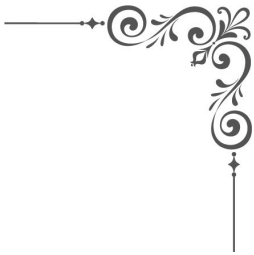
So soon? Catherine kept that hesitation to herself. She'd come here to marry the man, hadn't she? And he certainly wasn't an odious sort. She glanced at him now, taking in the tousled dark hair that sat beneath his hat, his angled jaw, eyes that hovered somewhere between brown and green, and his strong, broad figure. Surely if his personality were that of an ogre, she'd find out before tomorrow evening.

"Yes, that suits me," she said, attempting to project more courage than she felt.

He smiled at her then, and her spirits lifted. Perhaps he looked forward to marrying *her*. It was a nice thought.

You ought to tell him. No, it wasn't that she *ought*. She *must*. After all, how could she marry a man without letting him know she was carrying the child of her previous husband?

Even if it was inevitable she'd lose the baby.



Chapter Four

CATHERINE'S EYES WERE wide with delight as they entered the boarding house. Jonathan was proud of the place, certainly, but seeing it again through her eyes made him appreciate the fruits of his hard work all over again.

"This is lovely," she said, her voice a bit breathy. She ran a hand over the bottom of the stairwell banister. "It's both stately and inviting, like a fine home. I've never lived in such a place."

When she turned to him, her blue eyes seemed to sparkle in the sunlight that streamed through the windows on either side of the front door.

Jonathan beamed. "Thank you. That's what I was hoping to achieve. The town already has a more . . . rustic boarding house. It serves only men. I hoped to also welcome any ladies needing lodging here."

"Are there any? Ladies requiring lodging, I mean."

Her face looked so hopeful that Jonathan hated to tell her that wasn't the case. "Not just yet. But perhaps as Grover's Gulch grows more civilized, it will become more inviting to women."

She hid her disappointment well. "That makes sense. Mrs. Lowry is friendly enough, and I saw a few other women as we walked here."

"There are some in town. And you'll like our cook and housekeeper. Mrs. Bell reminds me of my own mother," he said.

"Aye, that's because she won't tolerate a dirty dish left upon the table," a gravelly voice said from behind Jonathan.

"Mrs. Lee, this is Mick O'Rourke, one of our guests." Jonathan gestured at the shorter, stocky man who'd just joined them in the entryway. "Mrs. Lee is my intended." His face went warm at the words, and he hoped neither Mrs. Lee or O'Rourke would notice.

"It's wonderful to meet you." Mrs. Lee let the scruffy O'Rourke kiss the back of her hand, and Jonathan felt the strangest urge to push the fellow away.

"I'm glad you arrived safely," O'Rourke said before donning his hat and bidding them good afternoon.

As the door shut behind his guest, Jonathan turned back to Mrs. Lee. "The rest of the men are working. You'll meet more of them at supper tonight."

She nodded, and he took her through the rest of the first floor. She marveled at the parlor, asked questions about the meals when he showed her the dining room, and nodded in approval at one of the

empty first floor guest rooms.

"If we do have lady guests, these rooms will be reserved for them. They're proximal to both Mrs. Bell's room and mine—ours—and so I thought that might lend a comfort and a feeling of safety to ladies." He looked to her for her opinion. Mrs. Bell had seemed satisfied with the idea, but it would be nice to get the thoughts of a younger woman who was, at the moment, unwed.

Mrs. Lee nodded. "Yes, I think that's a fine idea. I'd feel comfortable in one of these rooms."

"If you like, you may take this one." And when she smiled at the suggestion, he entered and set her carpetbag on the floor near the chair under the window. "It has a nice view too, for now. I imagine that will diminish as the town grows, though." He lifted the curtain, and she joined him at the window.

"Oh, it is lovely!" She smiled as she looked out at the mountains that stretched beyond the edge of town.

"Would you like to see the kitchen?" he asked.

She followed him down the hallway to the spacious kitchen. Mrs. Bell was there, stoking the fire in the stove to begin the supper preparations. "I'm planning a stew with some hearty bread," she said before she noticed Mrs. Lee.

"That sounds good," Jonathan said before introducing the two women.

"Mrs. Lee, welcome." Mrs. Bell clasped the younger woman's hand between her own.

"Please, call me Catherine. Your kitchen is lovely."

"You ought to see it at the height of dinner." Mrs. Bell laughed. "I'll be happy to have another woman about the place. Do you cook?"

Mrs. Lee nodded. "Yes, and I'm happy to help with tidying the rooms too."

Jonathan breathed a sigh of relief. Despite making certain Pastor Simpson passed on his need for a wife who could help manage the boarding house, he'd worried Mrs. Lee would come without knowledge of keeping house. And that even if she did, she and Mrs. Bell might not get along.

"Perhaps you could show me all that needs doing later tonight or tomorrow morning?" Mrs. Lee asked.

"Of course. We don't have many free moments around here, what with ten hungry—and messy—men," Mrs. Bell said with a sideways glance at Jonathan. "But we'll find time to have a cup of tea and chat."

Jonathan raised his hands as Mrs. Bell went back to the stove. "I tidy my own room," he said defensively.

"You do, but in general, men are messy creatures," the older

woman said as she shut the door to the stove.

Jonathan bit back a smile as he exchanged a glance with Mrs. Lee, who pressed a hand against her stomach. Mrs. Bell eyed her for a moment, her eyebrows raising, before turning toward the pantry.

"We'll have a talk this evening," she said over her shoulder to Mrs. Lee.

"That sounds lovely."

"We'll leave you be," Jonathan said to Mrs. Bell as he strode toward the rear door that led to the expanse of yard behind the boarding house.

Shutting the door firmly behind them, he extended his hand to gesture at the town off to the right. "That's about all there is to Grover's Gulch. We have the necessities, but nothing too fancy."

"That's quite all right by me," Mrs. Lee said. "I'm accustomed to living simply." She rested her hand on her stomach and sighed. "Mr. Clark—" She paused, laughing. "I'm sorry. I'm not entirely certain what to call you."

"It is a strange sort of situation, isn't it?" he replied with a grin. "If you'd like, I'd be happy for you to call me Jonathan."

She let out a breath, as if solving this simple problem took a larger worry off her mind. "And I suppose you ought to call me Catherine."

"Catherine," Jonathan said, testing her name against his tongue for the first time with her present.

She smiled at him briefly, before it flickered away and something akin to concern crossed her face.

"What is it?" he asked.

The train whistle blew, sending up birds that had landed in a nearby cottonwood tree.

"I ought to—" she started before pausing. "There is something you must know."

He waited patiently, wondering what could be weighing so heavily on her mind.

"My first husband, Harlan . . . he passed recently . . ."

Jonathan nodded. "Pastor Simpson informed me of that fact." He frowned, his brows knitted together as her words clicked together in his mind.

Of course.

"Please," he said, reaching for her gloved hands. "I understand that you must miss him. And I know that it may take some time for you to feel ready to be married to me in the full sense of the word. Please know that I see no reason to hurry. I'm willing to wait until you feel ready."

Her face colored a pleasing pink, which he hadn't expected but it somehow made her even more beautiful.

“That’s . . . Thank you,” she said, not looking him in the eye.

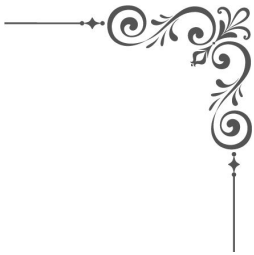
Jonathan cleared his throat and gently let her hands go. “I’m certain Mrs. Bell will be happy to help you with the tub if you’d like a bath after your travels.”

“Oh . . . yes.” She finally looked up at him. “Thank you. That would be very welcome.”

Something unsaid sat beneath the blue of her eyes. Jonathan studied her a moment, trying to determine what it was, but finally shrugged it off. She was nervous, that was all. This was not only a new town and a new home, but she was marrying a man she’d known only for about a half an hour.

Any sensible woman would carry a look of concern in Catherine’s situation.

It was up to Jonathan to easy any fears she had. And as he led her back inside, he decided he couldn’t wait to spend more time with her.



Chapter Five

THE BATH WAS HEAVENLY, and afterward, Catherine spent a pleasant remainder of the afternoon unpacking her few worldly possessions and then assisting Mrs. Bell in the supper preparations. As soon as the older woman discovered how adept Catherine was at baking bread, Mrs. Bell placed her in charge of baking both the supper and the breakfast loaves.

The comforting familiarity of mixing the ingredients and kneading the dough served as a balm to the wild thoughts that ran through Catherine's mind. She'd come so close to telling Jonathan about the baby she was carrying—and yet she hadn't. He'd addressed what he thought her concern was, and she'd been so embarrassed about that possibility that she couldn't bring her mind around to telling him her secret.

Not that she'd meant it to be a secret. If she'd known of her situation upon accepting Jonathan's offer through Pastor Jeffreys, she'd certainly have asked the pastor to pass that information along. But she hadn't known, not until the day she boarded the train in Knoxville.

And by then, it was too late.

After passing an entertaining meal with the boarders and trying desperately to remember each of their names, Catherine retreated to the kitchen with Mrs. Bell. As she placed the last cleaned and dried dish in the cupboard, the older woman took a pot of tea off the stove and gestured at the little kitchen table.

Catherine sank gratefully into the chair.

"You look peaked," Mrs. Bell said as she poured Catherine some tea.

Catherine pressed her hands to her face. "I suppose my travels have caught up with me."

Mrs. Bell shook her head in sympathy. "I couldn't imagine making such a journey again. Particularly if I were in your condition."

Catherine froze. Mrs. Bell knew.

She wrapped her hands around her tea cup, savoring the warmth and trying to calm her mind. Mrs. Bell didn't say the words unkindly, although she was right to harbor suspicion. All she had to do was be honest. "I didn't intend to conceal it."

Mrs. Bell gave her a guarded smile. "I take it Jonathan doesn't know?"

Catherine swallowed hard before shaking her head. "Not yet." She

hated that her voice came out in a whisper. All she wanted was for Mrs. Bell to understand, and now she looked like a snake of a woman, tricking a man into marrying her in order to give her child a name.

Which weren't the circumstances at all. And certainly not what Catherine had intended.

Mrs. Bell reached across the table and patted Catherine's arm. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Catherine looked into the woman's reassuring face. Why Mrs. Bell wanted to believe the best in her, Catherine didn't know. But she desperately wished for her mother, and Mrs. Bell was the next closest thing.

"All of this was arranged so quickly after my husband died. I was grateful for Pastor Jeffreys' help, as I wouldn't have had a home if I'd remained in Tennessee. Within two weeks after Harlan's funeral, I was on a train West. I didn't discover until that day that I was . . . expecting his baby. I felt quite ill the first couple of days on the train, and a kindly woman sitting nearby asked if I might be expecting a baby when nothing seemed to help my stomach. I thought back and realized she must be right." Catherine shook her head. "I don't know how I didn't know it before."

"Of course you wouldn't, if you haven't had a child before," Mrs. Bell said.

Catherine squeezed her eyes shut. "I haven't carried a baby to birth." She didn't add *yet.* She could hardly feel that hopeful.

"Oh, my dear." Mrs. Bell's hand squeezed her wrist. "I am so sorry."

"Thank you." Catherine's voice felt hoarse with unshed tears. She opened her eyes to find Mrs. Bell watching her with all the kindness in the world. "I didn't mean to keep it from Mr. . . . Jonathan. I simply didn't know until I was on my way here."

"It's a lot, losing one's husband. I should know," Mrs. Bell said, her gray eyes wistful. She pulled her hand back and took a sip of her tea. "You were likely overcome after his death. It's hard to pay attention to any changes in one's own health in such a situation."

Catherine nodded. Although Harlan had been more of a burden than a true husband in recent years, she'd mourned the boy she'd once fallen in love with even as she felt gratitude that she'd no longer have to face the man the war had turned him into. And then there was the fear of what she'd do as a widow, immediately followed by learning she'd lose her home.

Mrs. Bell was right. No wonder she hadn't realized she was carrying a baby.

"You know you must tell him as soon as possible," Mrs. Bell said. She fixed Catherine with a somewhat sharper look in her eyes.

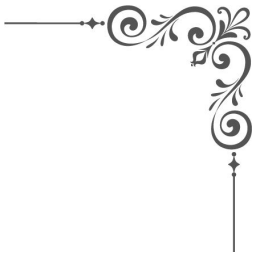
"Of course."

Mrs. Bell's gaze softened. "Jonathan is a good man. I've only known him for a few months, but I've never seen him act harshly or in an unkind manner. Particularly to a woman. He'll understand, but you must be honest with him." She paused. "I believe he'll be an excellent father."

Catherine bit down hard on her lip to keep the tears at bay. Whether she was crying for joy at Mrs. Bell's prediction or in sorrow at knowing she wouldn't carry this baby to term, she didn't know. Perhaps it was a little of each. She drew in a ragged breath as Mrs. Bell poured her more tea.

She would tell him. First thing tomorrow morning, he would know.

And then she'd pray as she never had before that *this* baby might survive.



Chapter Six

TUESDAY DAWNED WITH a hundred things that needed doing before Jonathan could even think about his upcoming nuptials that evening. Instead of sitting down to breakfast with the lodgers, as he usually did, Jonathan left the boarding house as soon as he was dressed.

Birds sang overhead as the morning sun illuminated the changing colors of the leaves. Fall came early to the mountains, Jonathan mused, as he made his way to the mercantile. He'd spent most of his life in Missouri, and then in towns on the Plains, learning business through working in various shops and hotels. Not since he'd arrived in Grover's Gulch had he experienced living in such spectacular beauty. The Plains held their own sort of beauty, but it was much more subdued. The mountains were like a rich woman, displaying all of her fancy expensive gowns and jewelry as frequently as possible, while the Plains were a farmer's wife, simple but pretty in her own right.

The mercantile held far too many options for a wedding gift for Catherine that Jonathan finally acquiesced to the help offered by the shopkeeper's wife. He left with a small, carved jewelry box. One that he hoped to help Catherine fill as the years went on.

He then stopped at the pastor's home to confirm the time of the marriage ceremony, the bank to pay on the note he'd taken out to build the boarding house, the shipping and freight office to inquire after a shipment of new linens he'd ordered, and finally, the livery stable to secure a wagon so that Catherine wouldn't need to potentially muss her dress and shoes in the mud between the boarding house and the church.

As William Denzinger, the stable owner, found him a carriage instead and a good horse to pull it, his wife came bustling inside the stable.

"Good morning, Mr. Clark!" she said in her usual cheerful voice as she held her baby close to her.

Jonathan didn't think he'd ever met a person as vivacious as Mrs. Denzinger. Her friendly nature was contagious, and he found himself smiling for no reason whatsoever. "Good morning, Mrs. Denzinger."

"Oh! I see you've chosen a carriage for your wedding." She beamed at him as her husband and their adopted son, Charlie, brought the carriage down the stable's aisle. "It's lovely. I believe it will make your intended very happy."

"Thank you," he said, his cheeks growing warm with the praise.

Denzinger, a man of much fewer words than his wife, patted the

side of the conveyance. “It’s a good choice.”

"I just came from visiting with your intended," Mrs. Denzinger said, shifting the baby in her arms. “She’s such a kind person. We couldn’t talk long, unfortunately, but I invited her to come for tea one afternoon when she has time. I think it’s wonderful, what you’re doing.”

Jonathan glanced at Denzinger, trying to figure out what his wife meant. But the man shrugged and turned to help his son fetch the horse.

Perhaps Mrs. Denzinger just found out that Catherine was a mail-order bride, like herself. “I’m hardly the first man in town to marry in this way.” He gave Mrs. Denzinger a smile.

But she tilted her head, clearly confused. “No, I mean for the child.”

“Child?”

“Yes, her baby,” Mrs. Denzinger said as she looked down at her own little one. “Not many men would be so agreeable.”

“Baby?”

She looked up at him then, her eyes growing wide. “Ohhh. Forgive me. I shouldn’t have— Oh, no. I’m so sorry. I ought to have kept my mouth closed.” Mrs. Denzinger paused. “Are you all right, Mr. Clark?”

Jonathan gripped the nearby post, his nails digging into the wood.

A baby.

Catherine was carrying a baby.

She hadn’t told him. Nor had he noticed. Was he blind? How could he—

“Mr. Clark?” Mrs. Denzinger watched him with concerned eyes.

“She told you this?” he demanded.

She stiffened, and he apologized. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so harsh.”

“It’s all right. I’m sure this is shocking. And no, she didn’t tell me. I simply observed and figured it out on my own.”

“So it’s possible that it isn’t true,” he said, the breath rushing out of him.

“Well . . . I suppose. But I’m rarely wrong about these things. I wanted children of my own for so long that I can’t help but notice when other women are expecting.” She cuddled the baby to her chest. “Please excuse me. Little Grace here needs to eat.”

Jonathan nodded in response, his mind spinning.

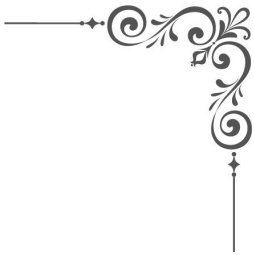
“Please be gentle with her,” Mrs. Denzinger said before she walked away. “If she hasn’t told you, there is likely a good reason.”

Denzinger returned with the horse and hitched him to the carriage. Jonathan paid the man and murmured his thanks, grateful to finally get outside into the fresh air. Atop the carriage, it was easier to think.

If Mrs. Denzinger was correct and Catherine was expecting a baby, why wouldn't she have said anything? Did her pastor know when he arranged the marriage? He couldn't have . . . unless he expected her to confess her situation in a letter. Yet they hadn't exchanged any letters. There hadn't been time, given her need to leave her old home quickly.

Catherine hardly seemed one for trickery. The child must be her late husband's. Jonathan refused to contemplate anything more scandalous, but as he drew up alongside the boarding house, he knew he ought to be prepared for anything.

Including sending her back to Tennessee.



Chapter Seven

CATHERINE EMERGED FROM one of the unused rooms victorious, carrying a feather-stuffed pillow in her arms.

"Here you are," she said as she handed the pillow to a confused Mr. Hixon. "It's for your neck. I heard you telling Mrs. Bell about the crick in your neck that you can't seem to shake. I thought that perhaps a second pillow might help."

Mr. Hixon took the pillow from her, glancing at it and then grinning at her. "I surely do appreciate it, Mrs. Lee. I want you to know I wasn't asking for anything, and—"

"Please," she said. "No one is using that pillow. It's doing no one any good just lying there in an unused room."

"Well, I thank you then." He clutched the pillow in his arms, looking every inch like a boy who'd just caught the biggest fish in the creek.

Catherine smiled as she watched him go upstairs to his room. This boarding house was exactly what she needed. After living so long in that little one-room house with only an occasional visit from Beth and with Harlan's presence—when he deigned to return home after a night of drinking—being here, among all these people, and being able to do little things to help make their days brighter lifted her own spirits.

She wondered if this was why Jonathan chose to open a boarding house. Perhaps he, too, enjoyed the constant companionship. She bit her lip as she glanced at the grandfather clock in the parlor. He'd left so early this morning and hadn't yet returned. She needed to tell him about the baby—preferably before they found themselves in front of the pastor.

The front door closed behind her, and she turned. Jonathan stood in the doorway, removing his hat and coat. Catherine smiled at him even as her heart started beating so fast she worried he'd hear it.

He's a good man. Mrs. Bell's words repeated in her mind. She had to be brave and keep faith that Mrs. Bell was right. But just as she started to open her mouth, he spoke first.

"I need to speak with you." His voice was even and patient, but lacked its usual jovial tone. Moreover, he frowned slightly as he spoke.

Catherine swallowed as she nodded. Something was wrong. Had he changed his mind about her? She forced herself to keep her hands at her sides, else she start twisting them together.

He led the way through the parlor and the hall to the little room

that served as his office. Catherine shut the door behind them. Now was as good a time as any, she figured. As long as he hadn't entirely decided against marrying her, she would tell him now about the baby she carried.

He stood behind his desk, resting his hands on the wood. He said nothing right away, and Catherine stood awkwardly on the other side, waiting.

Finally, he looked up at her, his eyes more brown than green in the shadows of the room. "I had business at the livery this morning and saw Mrs. Denzinger."

Catherine smiled at the mention of the friendly younger woman she'd met earlier that morning. Mrs. Denzinger had gone out of her way, bringing her baby with her, to say hello to Catherine and to welcome her to town. Whatever in the world could Jonathan find disagreeable about Mrs. Denzinger?

"She came by to visit me this morning. She was very welcoming," Catherine said, placing her hand on her stomach.

Jonathan's eyes darted to her hand. Catherine removed it and dropped it to her side. But then his eyes found hers, and he looked at her in a way that made her heart ache.

"So it's true," he said in a quiet voice.

"Pardon me?" But even as she said the words, Catherine feared she understood his meaning. "You're speaking of the baby." The words came out in a whisper.

He said nothing in response but continued to watch her. His jaw was set, and his body was rigid. One glance at him indicated he was angry, and his eyes were glazed with hurt.

Guilt clawed its way up inside Catherine. "I'd planned to tell you. I . . . I tried to last night, but . . . And then I thought I would this morning, but you'd already gone." She closed her eyes. This wasn't working. She was making excuses, and he likely thought she'd intended to trap him into marriage to give her child a name.

She opened her eyes again and raised her chin. "The baby is my late husband's. I didn't learn of my situation until after I'd boarded the train to come here. I would never have kept this a secret had I known. And I . . . well . . ." She swallowed. She couldn't bring herself to speak of the babies she'd lost over the years. It was too much for right now, and besides, by some miracle, she still carried this one.

Jonathan kept his eyes on her, that hurt still present despite the set of his jaw.

"I hope I have not disappointed you, although I am sorry I didn't say anything yesterday." She paused and squared her shoulders. "There is nothing shameful about my situation, however, and so I will not apologize for that."

Across the desk from her, Jonathan regarded her for another moment before finally relaxing his stance. “I understand.”

She thought she’d never heard words so beautiful. Her shoulders relaxed. “You do?”

He nodded as he ran a hand through his dark hair, and Catherine’s heart tripped over itself. He was a devastatingly handsome man, and all she wanted was for those arms to wrap around her and pull her close, letting her know that all would be well.

You are being foolish, she told herself, even as she couldn’t take her eyes off Jonathan. Foolishness was what found her married to Harlan, and she wouldn’t cave to such emotions again. If Jonathan accepted her—*oh, how she hoped he would!*—it would be only for practical purposes. A place to live. Food to eat. And perhaps even a purpose here, serving others.

But not love.

“I understand,” he repeated. “But I need some time to think about this.”

Catherine pushed her lips together to force away the emotion that rose despite her promise to herself. “All right,” she said, her traitorous voice cracking.

A flicker of some emotion—empathy, perhaps—crossed Jonathan’s face and then settled in his eyes again. It reminded Catherine of something her mother had often said. *The eyes are the windows to the soul.* She’d never thought much about it, but the saying rang true when it came to Jonathan.

And as she left him alone in the office, she prayed harder than she ever had before. He was considering the marriage, and that was something. He hadn’t thrown her out or asked someone to escort her back to the depot.

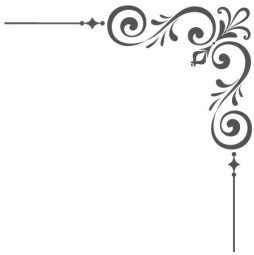
Mrs. Bell appeared in the hallway, and with only one look at Catherine, was at her side immediately.

“He knows,” was all Catherine could manage to say before the tears she kept inside strangled her voice.

“It will be well,” Mrs. Bell replied as she wrapped an arm around Catherine.

She laid her head on the older woman’s shoulder and imagined Mrs. Bell was Mama. She closed her eyes and felt those words deep down inside.

How she hoped they would be true.



Chapter Eight

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for Jonathan to make up his mind. Catherine had stood here before him, utterly bereft and yet proud. His suspicion had been correct—she hadn't tricked him. He wished she'd mentioned the situation yesterday, and he could almost pinpoint when he thought she'd meant to, but he wouldn't hold that against her.

The facts were what they were. She needed a husband. He needed a wife. And, heaven help him, he had a hard time not thinking about her. Those bright eyes, her lovely curls, her graceful demeanor, her immediate friendship with Mrs. Bell, and even the easy way with which she interacted with his lodgers.

He couldn't have chosen anyone more perfect on his own.

Even now, as he leaned against the doorframe, she sat in the parlor, conversing with two of the newest guests, a pair of brothers who'd come to Grover's Gulch in search of business opportunities.

"Well, I would never have imagined you capable of such a thing, Mr. Carter," she said, and both of the men laughed.

Jonathan smiled. She was naturally gifted at making conversation, despite being thrust into a situation where she knew no one. When she turned to see him standing there, her soft blue eyes and glowing skin made him momentarily forget where he was and why he'd come in search of her.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but I must take Mrs. Lee away from you for a while," he said from the doorway.

The elder brother, Fred Carter, rose and placed a hat on his head as he grinned at Jonathan. "I tried to persuade Mrs. Lee to marry me instead, but she seems set on her choice."

"Does she?" Jonathan glanced at Catherine, who blushed a pretty shade of pink that made him want to push both the other men from the room and take her into his arms.

He gripped the edge of the doorframe. He'd be making the same decision if Catherine was homely, he told himself. This had nothing to do with the way she made his mind spin or his stomach feel as if he'd swallowed a herd of dragonflies.

To his everlasting relief, both brothers left immediately, and he crossed the room to sit beside Catherine.

"Mr. Carter and his brother are quite the entertaining duo," she said, clasping her hands in her lap.

He smiled. "That's a very apt description. Thank you for listening to their stories."

Her shoulders relaxed, and Jonathan hated that he'd made her anxious. "I want to apologize for my reaction to your news."

Her mouth fell open, but she closed it quickly. "I am the one who ought to be apologizing," she said. "Not you."

"You've already done so. I confess I didn't like learning of . . . your situation in the way I did, but it's in the past now. The only question is how to move forward. And while I didn't expect to welcome a child so soon, I hope you'll still consider marrying me." He didn't question the words at all as he spoke them.

Hopefully that meant he was doing the right thing.

Catherine's face radiated the most pure joy Jonathan had ever seen. "Yes. Yes, I will. Thank you."

And before he knew it, she'd thrown her arms about him. He froze for a second, stunned by her exuberant reaction, before lifting his arms and wrapping them around her. It was almost too much, this closeness. Catherine was warm and soft and it took every ounce of strength he had not to bury his face in her curls.

She sat back, her face bright red. She brushed her hands over her skirts. "I shouldn't have done that. Any one of the guests could have come in here and seen . . ."

"A happy couple about to be married?" he supplied with a grin that made her laugh.

"I love it here," she said. "Thank you for letting me stay."

Jonathan's heart constricted at her simple words. "I couldn't have it any other way."

The way she looked at him, with such hope in her eyes, made his heart beat faster. He only hoped he could live up to her expectations of him. "I must see to a few more things. We're due at the church at five."

He needed to move, else he would start doubting himself and considering every flaw he possessed. He retreated to his room to change into work clothing, thinking that tackling the half-built shed behind the boarding house was ideal work for the afternoon. It would keep both his mind and his body fully occupied.

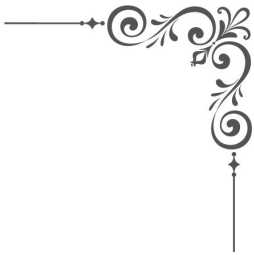
Before heading out to begin the work, Jonathan paused in front of the small looking glass propped up next to his washbasin and pitcher. In the reflection, his father looked back at him.

Jonathan frowned and laid the glass down flat. As much as he might look like his father, he was not the same man. He would be a good pa to Catherine's child—*his* child, he reminded himself. That little boy or girl she was carrying would be his, and he would be the only father that baby knew.

He drew in a shuddering breath at the weight of that responsibility. He'd always wanted children, even though the ghost of

his own father's failings loomed in the shadows of his mind.

He would be better. He *had* to be better.



Chapter Nine

THE WEDDING WAS A SIMPLE affair, and afterward, Catherine settled easily into life at the boarding house. She helped Mrs. Bell, took meals with their guests, and enjoyed conversation with Jonathan in the evenings. A week passed easily, and as Sunday turned into Monday, Catherine felt as if the boarding house had always been her home.

It was late Monday night when Catherine slid the bread into the oven. She'd thought that baking might quell her nightly worries about the baby—the ones that kept her lying in bed hour after hour, waiting for the inevitable to happen.

And yet it still hadn't.

Perhaps she'd bake another loaf. They could never have too much bread. The more she and Mrs. Bell baked, the more the men ate. She sang the refrain of a hymn that both she and Beth especially loved back in Rollings Woods as she retrieved more flour. She'd just reached her favorite part of the song when she turned and spotted Jonathan at the door.

"Please don't stop." He smiled and strode to the table.

"Oh, well . . ." She didn't sing often in front of other people, only at church where her voice blended with others. And with Beth, of course. Or when she thought she was alone. She'd known none of the hymns when she attended services here for the first time with Jonathan, so she supposed he hadn't heard her sing—until now.

"You have a lovely singing voice," he said. He watched her with such intensity that Catherine thought if her cheeks grew any warmer, she might burst into flames right there in the kitchen. Despite the fact that they'd been married for a week now, she wasn't certain if she'd ever grow used to the way he looked at her.

It reminded her of the way Harlan had looked at her, before the war. And a whole lot of good that had done her. She wouldn't lose her heart to Jonathan in that way—she *couldn't.* That would lead to nothing but disappointment.

"Thank you," she said softly in response to his compliment.

"What are you doing in here?" He craned his neck to see her workspace.

"Baking," she answered, setting the scoop of flour down. She brushed her hands together. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "I heard someone rustling around in here and thought it might be one of the guests, struck with hunger at

midnight." He pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit.

It was only then that Catherine realized how much her feet ached and her back hurt from hours of standing and moving about. She sat.

"What are you doing baking in the dead of night?" he asked as he sat in the chair next to her.

"It calms my nerves," she answered truthfully.

He cocked his head. "Do you have something weighing on your mind?"

"I, well . . ." She looked down at her stomach, unsure how to put her fears into words.

He smiled. "Mrs. Bell told me that it's fairly normal for mothers-to-be to worry over their unborn children. Come spring, you'll be able to hold this little one in your arms." He looked at her with an expression akin to reverence, as if he could hardly believe that it was possible.

Catherine wanted to match his hope, to tell him her fears were normal, and that she, too, was excited for the birth of the baby.

But that would all be a lie. And it was time for him to know the truth.

She drew in a deep breath. "I was married for five years, and all during that time, I was unable to give birth to a single baby."

Jonathan scrunched up his forehead, as if he were trying to make sense of her words.

"I lost each baby I carried," she explained, the pangs of every single loss weighing her words. The pain lessened each time in between the pregnancies, but it never fully disappeared, roaring back to life at each new loss.

Understanding passed across Jonathan's face. He said nothing, but reached out to lay a hand upon her arm. Catherine's skin prickled under his touch. It was such a small gesture, and yet it filled her with warmth from head to toe. Harlan had never been so understanding. She'd often wondered if he knew how much it hurt her to lose each child. If it hurt him—and she wanted to believe it did—he never showed it.

But here was Jonathan, a man she'd only known for a week, extending sympathy in a way Catherine had only known from her mother, Beth, and some of the other ladies in Rollings Woods.

"I can't say I know how you're feeling, but I can understand loss," he said in a quiet voice. "And I can understand fear."

"Thank you." It was all she needed, really. After a moment, she added, "I want to say that I'm hopeful this time will be different, but it's difficult to summon hope after so many disappointments. Sometimes I wonder if God truly wants me to be a mother." A single tear forced its way from her eye and she quickly swiped it away.

"Only God knows the answer to that question." Jonathan squeezed

her arms, and she looked up into his eyes. “But I personally believe that you would be a wonderful mother to any child. And I’ll hold the hope that we get to meet this one.”

It was all she could do to restrain herself from flinging her arms around him again. They were married, yes, but she still hardly knew him.

As much as she appreciated his kindness, there was one other concern she needed to voice. “I fear you’ll be disappointed if I’m unable to carry children.”

“Let’s not worry about that now,” he said, and Catherine had never been so grateful. “Tell me, did you grow up with siblings?”

It was obvious that he was trying to distract her from her worries. “I didn’t. Did you?”

“I’m the youngest of five. All boys,” he said, and Catherine winced on his behalf.

“That couldn’t have been easy, growing up.”

He laughed. “It wasn’t, but I owe them everything.” He frowned, and Catherine had the feeling there was more to his story than he wished to tell. Then the frown disappeared, and he tilted his head. “May I ask why you didn’t go home to your parents instead of answering a marriage request from a strange fellow in Grover’s Gulch?”

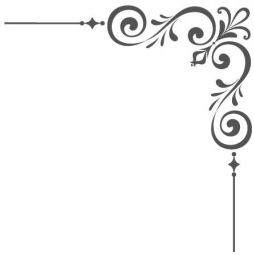
His description made her smile. “My father passed on some years ago, and my mother lives with another family. They don’t have much at all, so I didn’t wish to be a burden on them or upon any other family.”

He nodded.

“Besides,” she said, feeling a bit brave. “I liked the idea of an adventure. I’ve lived in Tennessee my entire life, and it’s brought me nothing but sorrow. Perhaps I hoped that by coming here, I could change that.”

“I surely hope so.” Jonathan regarded her with that intense sort of gaze again. Catherine wanted to look away as the color rose in her cheeks, but she didn’t. Instead, she forced herself to meet his eyes. When he smiled, she felt as if she were flying.

It would be so easy to lose her heart to him. And she feared it was already happening, a little bit at a time.



Chapter Ten

AS OCTOBER STRETCHED into November, Jonathan found excuses to spend time in the kitchen, where Catherine worked side-by-side with Mrs. Bell, or outside, where she hung laundry in the hopes that the sun's weaker rays might dry linens and clothing. He'd talk to her of anything and everything, just to hear her voice. But his favorite times were when she didn't know he was nearby, and she would sing. He tried to encourage her to sing for the guests, but she'd immediately decline. Jonathan could only figure that she was shy about her talent. And a talent it was, too. When she sang, it was like peering into a corner of heaven.

By late November, Catherine's midsection had grown rounder, and he insisted upon purchasing her fabric for new skirts and bodices.

"It's too much," she said as Mr. Griffin, the man who owned the mercantile, measured and cut the fabric she'd chosen. Not that there had been much to choose from. Jonathan was relieved the mercantile carried *any* fabric that would suit a woman.

"It's serviceable," he said, frowning over the fact that it would only be enough for two new dresses—one for daily wear and one for Sundays.

She chewed on her lip. "What if . . .?" And when she looked at him with sadness in her eyes. "I suppose I could take them in if need be."

He wanted to reach a hand up to her face and brush away that resigned look with a flick of his thumb. But considering they were in the mercantile, that wouldn't do. Instead, he reached over and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Their packages wrapped, they exited the mercantile and began the short walk back to the boarding house. They passed Mrs. Lowry, and she and Catherine enjoyed a short chat before they continued on.

"Now that you've been in Grover's Gulch for a while, what do you think of it?" Jonathan asked as he shifted the packages into the crook of his arm.

Catherine's smile seemed to light up the gray day. "It's more than I'd hoped it would be. I love the shopkeepers and our guests. It would be nice to have more ladies, of course, but the ones that are here are friendly and helpful to one another. I especially adore the mountains and the snow and the train—"

Jonathan chuckled. "The train?"

She nodded, entirely serious, as the curls that had fallen from their pins bounced. "It always brings someone new and interesting."

“That is true,” he acknowledged. It was exciting in a way, seeing who and what might arrive each time the train pulled into the depot. Last week, there had been a fellow selling patent medicines, and this week, an operatic singer on his way to California had stopped for a couple of nights and had entertained half the town in the church.

“But are you sure about the snow?” he asked, trying not to grin as he knew what her answer would be. It had snowed for the first time that season a few weeks ago, and his new wife had been as giddy as a child with a stash of penny candy.

“Of course! I can’t wait until it comes again.”

“Oh, it will,” he said ominously.

“It’s nothing to you because you grew up with it,” she said. “I—”

At that very moment, the door to Figaro’s Saloon flew open and a man stumbled out backward. Jonathan threw an arm out across Catherine, else the fellow would have landed on top of her.

The man lay on the ground before them, his eyes staring up at the sky. Jonathan peered down into his face. The man blinked slowly at him and a languid smile stretched across his face. “You got a nickel?”

Satisfied the fellow wasn’t hurt, Jonathan reached for Catherine’s hand and led her around the man. He had to step into the street to make that happen. At least the snow from a few days ago had melted, but it had left the road muddy.

“Are you all right?” he asked Catherine as he stepped back up onto the plank sidewalk.

She nodded. “I was simply surprised, that’s all.”

She didn’t move to extract her hand from his, and Jonathan relished the feel of it nestled safely against his own palm. Her gloves were soft but he imagined the skin of her hands to be even softer.

They walked hand-in-hand all the way back to the boarding house, where they entered right in the middle of an argument between Mrs. Bell and a tall fellow in a battered brown hat.

“Excuse me,” he said, handing Catherine’s parcels to her and gesturing for her to leave the entryway. “What’s happening here?”

“I came for a room, but this woman says she can’t give me one.” The man turned to face Jonathan. They were about equal in height, but this fellow was broader—and had a look so sour that it could cause a snake to wither up and die.

“I told him I needed to wait for you,” Mrs. Bell said, her hands planted on her hips.

Jonathan nodded, entirely understanding why she wished to have his opinion. At first glance, this man wasn’t the sort one could assume would be a good guest. His clothing had seen better days, and under that old hat, his blond hair looked as if it hadn’t met soap in months.

“What’s your business in Grover’s Gulch?” Jonathan asked.

The man looked ready to sneer at the question, but then seemed to think better of it. “I’m looking to join up with one of the mining operations.”

Jonathan nodded. At least he had a job in mind, which meant he wasn’t likely here to cause trouble. “We have rooms available. I’ll rent one to you for the posted rate, provided you agree to the rules. I don’t tolerate fighting, drunkenness, or lady visitors in any place but the parlor. If you can’t agree to those, there’s another boarding house down the road.”

“They’re full,” the blond man said.

Jonathan said nothing. Either the fellow would agree to the rules or not. He didn’t ask much, but he intended this boarding house to be a place of civility. A place where gentlemen didn’t need to worry after their wallets and where ladies felt welcome to reside.

“All right, I’ll take the room,” the man finally said.

Mrs. Bell handed him the lodging book, and he carefully wrote out his name—Frank Prince. The neatness with which he formed his letters was entirely at odds with his demeanor and appearance, but Jonathan kept that opinion to himself.

After Prince handed over his first night’s payment, Mrs. Bell gave him a key and directed him to a room upstairs.

“He’s an ornery one,” she said as soon as Prince had disappeared around the corner at the top of the stairs.

“I’ll keep my eye on him,” Jonathan replied. Prince’s expression had left him with a sick feeling in his stomach, and it wasn’t until Catherine returned to the parlor—a hand resting gently on her growing belly—that he realized why.

The expression Prince wore before he agreed to take the room was the same Jonathan’s father would get when he grew angry.

“Is everything all right?” Catherine asked, resting a hand on his arm.

Her feather-light touch was exactly what he needed. His clenched muscles relaxed and the worry that had begun building in the back of his mind subsided some. He smiled at her and marveled yet again about how lucky he was that she’d come into his life. “It is.”

“Will that man be staying here?” Catherine’s eyes wandered to the stairs.

“For now.”

“Fear not,” Mrs. Bell interjected. “If he’s belligerent, we have plenty of guests who’ll be more than happy to toss him out on his heels.”

Jonathan laughed at the image. “Mrs. Bell is right.” And that was the reason he needn’t worry about leaving her and Catherine at the boarding house while he conducted various errands. Men like the

Carter brothers and Mick O'Rourke were as protective of the ladies as Jonathan himself.

"Speaking of our guests, a little bird told me that today is Gabriel Carter's birthday. I thought we might bake a cake," Mrs. Bell said to Catherine.

"Would that little bird be his brother?" Catherine asked with laugh.

"Perhaps." Mrs. Bell led the way toward the kitchen and Catherine began to follow.

"Wait." Jonathan reached out and took hold of his wife's arm while Mrs. Bell retreated to the kitchen.

Catherine turned and looked up at him, not a single worry evident in her expression. "What is it?"

"I only wanted to remind you to tell me if any guest makes you feel afraid or uncomfortable. I know Mrs. Bell won't hesitate to say anything, but I don't want you to hesitate either. Do you understand?" The image of Frank Prince's angry expression—the one that was spoiling for a fight—flitted through his mind, and he wished he'd sent the man packing instead of renting him a room.

Nothing good could come of that look.

"I will," Catherine replied. When he didn't let go of her arm, she added, "I promise."

He swallowed, searching her face. If anything happened to her . . . the thought made his insides tie up in knots.

"Jonathan?" She stepped toward him, stopping directly in front of him. "Are you all right?"

He was still holding onto her arm as if it were the only thing tethering him to the ground. He loosened his grip and nodded, even though his throat was parched and he had the strangest urge to grab her and tuck her away somewhere safe.

She reached up and touched his face, her fingers just barely grazing the skin of his cheek. He closed his eyes and willed his heart to stop galloping off like a herd of frightened horses. He was here, at the boarding house in Grover's Gulch—*his* boarding house. He wasn't back in Missouri, at his father's house. He wasn't a scared little boy anymore. And Pa had been dead for nigh on ten years.

Jonathan opened his eyes to see Catherine, her hand still on his face and her expression filled with concern.

"I'm fine," he said, lacing his fingers through hers and pulling her hand away.

"Hmm." It didn't sound as if she believed him, and that wouldn't do. He needed to protect her, not the other way around.

"I was only thinking." He forced himself to smile, but all that did was make her wrinkle her forehead as she studied him.

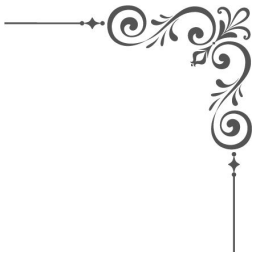
“We’ll talk more later,” he said as he squeezed her hand. “I need to get back to work on that shed if there’s any of hope of finishing it before the real cold sets in. And I believe Mrs. Bell is awaiting your help with that cake.”

“All right,” Catherine said, her voice full of uncertainty.

The moment she left the parlor, Jonathan rubbed his face with his hands. It had been so long since he’d felt paralyzed like that, those memories rising to the surface as if they’d happened yesterday instead of years ago.

That couldn’t happen again. He had a wife, a baby on the way, and a business to look after. And he could protect none of them if he slipped back into the ghosts of his past.

It *wouldn’t* happen again. He refused to let it.



Chapter Eleven

NOVEMBER SLIPPED INTO December, and with it came more snow. Catherine delighted in the frozen, fluffy flakes that fell from the sky and blanketed the town in white. When it snowed, everything was clean and new. It reminded her of how she always envisioned an innocent soul, untainted by the terrible things in the world.

"Catherine Clark!" Mrs. Bell's voice sounded from the doorway.

When Catherine turned, her arms outstretched to catch the flakes that immediately melted in her hands, the older woman popped a hand onto her hip.

"What are you doing out here without a coat? You'll catch your death, and how do you think that will make the baby feel?"

Catherine tried not to giggle at Mrs. Bell's nonsensical question. But the woman was right. It was absolutely freezing outside, and now, realizing she'd come out without a coat, gloves, or a hat, she shivered.

Mrs. Bell held the door open as Catherine slipped back into the boarding house.

"What were you thinking?" Mrs. Bell asked, brushing the snowflakes from Catherine's hair.

"I wasn't," she confessed. "It just looked so lovely that I couldn't resist being out there."

Mrs. Bell harrumphed. "Well, next time at least put a coat on. For that baby, if nothing else."

Catherine grinned as she pinned an apron to her dress. By some miracle, the baby was still well. There was no midwife in town, but there was a doctor who'd come and examined her, and he'd pronounced the baby as well as could be. And Mrs. Lowry had reassured Catherine that all of her strange symptoms—including the sudden aversion she had to chicken—were good signs.

Each and every day, she woke up and placed a hand on her belly and said a prayer. The worry still gnawed at the edges of her mind. It was impossible *not* to be certain that the worst was yet to come. But a tiny seed of hope flourished too.

Maybe coming here was the best thing she could have done. And maybe being surrounded by love and kindness was what was keeping this baby alive.

All Catherine knew was that she was thankful each and every single day.

"We ought to decorate for Christmas soon," Mrs. Bell said as she began cracking eggs. "It would lighten the men's spirits as this cold

sets in."

"Decorate?" Catherine asked. "Like at church?" She imagined a simple spray of evergreens adorning the boarding house door and candles placed along the shelves in the parlor. It *would* be nice . . .

"Yes, but perhaps a bit more." Mrs. Bell paused when Catherine stared at her in confusion. "A Christmas tree would be pretty, don't you think?"

Catherine furrowed her brow. "A Christmas *tree*?" She'd heard of Christmas pudding and Christmas gifts, but never a Christmas tree.

Mrs. Bell laughed. "It is an odd tradition, isn't it? I believe it's German. We certainly never had one when I was a girl. But a family I worked for in Topeka set one up each year, and it was always so lovely."

Catherine blinked at her, trying to figure out how one might "set up" a tree.

"Good morning, ladies!" Jonathan appeared from around the corner, snow melting into his coat as he shrugged it off.

Catherine took it from him and hung it up on a peg near the back door. When she turned, she found him watching her. This happened frequently, and she hoped it was because he was growing to care for her. Because, despite all of her reservations against giving her heart away again, she was helpless to fight the feelings that had grown even more strong since she married Jonathan.

"Now, Jonathan, are you familiar with Christmas trees?" Mrs. Bell asked as she set the dough she'd been working into a bread pan.

Jonathan drew his eyes from Catherine and turned toward Mrs. Bell. "I am. Do you wish to have one here?"

Catherine clasped her hands together. She felt rather foolish, being the only one who didn't know of this tradition. But then again, Christmas in Rollings Woods was a simple affair. With Harlan's attention anywhere but on her, she'd never truly celebrated Christmas with him, and as a child, Mama and Papa had barely enough money to scrape together those things necessary to survive. The only Christmas Catherine was familiar with was a plain church service and folks saying, "Merry Christmas."

"I think it might be nice to set up a tree," Mrs. Bell said. "It would bring the spirit of the holiday inside, and make everything quite cheerful."

"I'll fell one next week," Jonathan replied, rubbing his hands together.

All Catherine could piece together was that Jonathan would cut down a tree and bring it inside. Which sounded odd, but perhaps it wasn't considering that her church back in Rollings Woods hung boughs cut from pines along the walls at Christmas time. This was like

a pine bough—except much larger.

"What do we *do* with the tree once it's inside?" Catherine finally asked. She'd imagined it propped against a wall, or hanging sideways like a giant evergreen bough in the parlor. No matter which way she pictured it, it seemed awfully . . . large.

"Why, we decorate it," Mrs. Bell said with a benevolent smile. "We can make strings of popped corn, attach candles, knit a few little things . . ."

"Perhaps they'll have something at the mercantile, too," Jonathan added.

"It sounds lovely," Catherine said. She couldn't quite picture how the candles wouldn't catch the branches on fire, but she supposed she would find out.

"It will be," Jonathan replied as he reached for her hand.

She smiled up at him, reveling in the security she felt when his hand wrapped around hers. His eyes looked particularly green in the morning light, and she thought she could be quite happy simply looking into them for the rest of her life.

"Hello? Anyone here?" A gruff male voice sounded from the front entry.

"I'll help him," Catherine said. She reluctantly pulled her hand from Jonathan's, removed her apron, and went to see what the gentleman needed.

"Good morning," she said cheerfully as she emerged into the entryway. "How can I help you?"

The man looked her up and down as if he were surprised to see a woman. "Need a room. You got one?"

Catherine found the ledger book tucked onto a shelf and opened it. "I may."

"*May*?"

When Catherine looked up from the book, she found the man glaring at her. "I— I have to check the book. We've been busy as of late and I can't remember—"

"It ain't got a thing to do with whether you've got room or not." The man had gone red in the face. "You don't want to rent a room to the likes of me. I'm not good enough for your fancy boarding house. Frank said this place was hoity-toity." He'd taken a couple of steps closer to her, and Catherine found herself pressed against the shelf, the edges of the wood digging into her back and the ledger the only thing between herself and this man.

"Sir, that isn't—"

"Well, I've got news for you, little lady." His face was inches from hers, and Catherine winced as his hot breath hit her skin. "You can't tell Grady March to go. I got a need for a place to stay. Go get Frank

Prince. He'll vouch for me."

Catherine couldn't get Mr. Prince or anyone. This Grady March had her cornered, and all she could think about was how—or if—she'd be able to push him away to get help.

"Mr. March, *please*," she said, her heart pounding in her ears.

His hands wrapped around her upper arms and she thought for certain he would begin to shake her. Her eyes prickled with unshed tears. What if he hurt the baby?

And then, in an instant, he was gone. It happened so fast, she gasped for breath. Jonathan had yanked Mr. March away from her and shoved him against the front door. The man sputtered, as if he was just as surprised as Catherine.

"Do *not* put your hands on my wife." Jonathan's voice shook with barely contained rage. Catherine had never seen him look like this. His usual easy-going self had disappeared entirely, leaving an angry man in its place.

Mr. March straightened himself and glared at Jonathan. "All I wanted was a room," he said. "And your little lady wouldn't give me one."

"No one is going to give you one now," Jonathan replied, his fists clenched of his sides. "Get out."

Catherine tried to steady her breathing as she watched. After all she had endured in her life, the one thing she hated the most was feeling helpless. And yet, that was exactly how she felt.

But it was different this time. This time someone stood up for her.

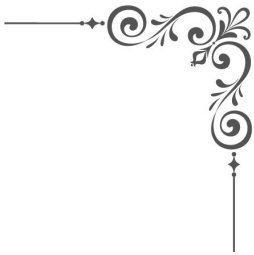
She kept her eyes on Mr. March, not entirely trusting him to leave without attempting to swing at Jonathan. But after a few moments, the man yanked the door open and disappeared outside.

Catherine's shoulders slumped in relief. Jonathan turned and his eyes immediately softened from the hard gaze he had given Mr. March.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Catherine couldn't speak. All she could do was shake her head.

In an instant, Jonathan was before her, sweeping her up into his arms.



Chapter Twelve

IT WASN'T POSSIBLE to hold Catherine any tighter than he already was, and yet that was all Jonathan wanted. She shuddered against him and his heart hurt so much he thought it might burst. How anyone thought it was all right to treat her as that man did was inconceivable to Jonathan. And if he ever saw him again, Jonathan wasn't certain he'd be able to control himself.

He drew his hands from around Catherine and placed them on either side of her face. He looked down into her beautiful blue eyes, the ones in which he could lose himself entirely, and searched them for any signs of hurt or fear. "Are you all right?" he asked again.

"Yes." Her voice sounded as if it were being pulled over the stony precipice of one of the mountains surrounding Grover's Gulch. "He frightened me, that's all."

"It never should have happened." Jonathan couldn't keep the growl from his words. "I don't want you or Mrs. Bell up here alone."

Catherine nodded just slightly, and he ran a thumb over one of her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered shut.

"I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you or the baby," he said, realizing the truth of his words as he spoke them. They were everything to him, this incredible, sweet, caring woman and the child she carried. And he knew without hesitation that he would have done whatever needed doing to protect them both.

One of her hands wrapped around his arm as if she were steadying herself. And although sunlight streamed through the nearby parlor and dining room windows, and the sounds of guests stirring in their rooms filtered through the space around them, Jonathan felt as if they were entirely alone. As if it were only the two of them, the soft skin of her face under his hands and her delicate fingers holding tight to his arm. If he lowered his lips to hers right now, what would she do? Would she hold perfectly still, or would she pull him closer and kiss him in return?

The desire to find out was so strong that it buzzed in Jonathan's ears, blocking out any other rational thought. He held her gaze for a moment. She didn't look away, and when she parted her lips just a bit, the roaring in his mind grew and grew. He drew his thumb down to the corner of her lips. She sighed and closed her eyes again.

And if another two seconds had passed without Mrs. Bell coming to the door, he would have—*finally*—discovered what it was like to kiss his wife in a way that was more than the chaste exchange they'd

had during the wedding ceremony.

"I came to ensure all was well, but it appears to be," Mrs. Bell said with a chuckle.

Jonathan dropped his hands from Catherine's face, taking one of her hands into his instead. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her chest rose and fell quickly. He pushed his lips together to keep from smiling at her state—and the fact that she seemed to want him to kiss her as much as he'd hoped for the same.

"I've decided it's best if neither you nor Catherine are up here alone, particularly when we don't know who might walk through the door," Jonathan said, Catherine's hand securely tucked into his own.

Mrs. Bell nodded. "This town seems to grow every day. Why, I don't know half the people I pass along the sidewalk these days."

"Growth is good," Jonathan said. "But it does come with risk." And risk wasn't something he cared to contemplate when it came to the safety of those he loved.

Mrs. Bell eyed Catherine's hand resting on her stomach. "Why don't you sit and I'll take care of finishing up breakfast?"

"Oh, I couldn't—" Catherine started.

"You could indeed. Mr. Clark?" Mrs. Bell looked to him for assistance.

"I agree." And without further discussion, he led Catherine to his office.

She sank into the chair as he pulled the other chair from behind the desk to sit next to her. Through the window, the snow blew in tiny flurries, making him grateful for the good fortune to have a warm place to live and work.

He turned his chair so that he faced her and reached out to take one of her hands in his. Her face was paler than normal although she smiled at him.

"Are you certain you wouldn't rather lie down for a time?" he asked.

"Oh no, I'm fine. Just shaken up a bit, I suppose." She paused, biting her lip. "Thank you for stepping in."

"Of course." Did she think he'd leave her to fend off that man on her own? "I'm only sorry I wasn't there from the beginning. I could have prevented the situation altogether."

"Please, it wasn't your fault. I despise feeling so helpless, yet I couldn't think of how I might get him to leave. I didn't . . . I didn't expect you to come running."

Jonathan tilted his head. "What do you mean? I was hardly about to leave you alone when I overheard him."

"I suppose I'm not used to that." She looked down at her knees as if she expected to find some sort of explanation there. "Harlan never .

. . he wasn't . . ."

She hadn't spoken much of her first husband. Jonathan had taken notice of her lack of grief over his death, which led him to suspect their marriage hadn't been a happy one. But he hadn't wanted to push her into reliving painful memories, and so he hadn't asked about it.

"You don't have to speak on it," he said gently.

She lifted her eyes to him, their depths shiny with unshed tears. "I loved him once, and he loved me. But the war changed him. Afterward, once we married, I was on my own so often that I grew used to relying only upon myself. And I . . . well, I suppose I didn't expect you to be different. But you are."

Jonathan didn't know what to say about that, but he felt her raw emotions in his very soul. He caressed her hand with his thumb, and said, "I'm your husband. It's my duty to keep you safe. And besides that, I *want* to protect you. You and the baby. I . . ." His voice caught in his throat. *I love you*, he wanted to say, but the words refused to be spoken. Instead, an image of his father, red-faced and angry flitted across his mind.

Catherine's face softened and she let out a breath, driving away any thoughts of his father. "I suppose I can let you do that." She gave him a small smile, and it lit him up from the inside.

He decided right then and there that he'd do anything to see her smile at him, over and over and over.

"I feel much better now," she said, running a hand over her skirt. "I'd like to go help Mrs. Bell."

Jonathan paused, considering her. She *looked* much better, her face less peaked and her sweet smile back again. "All right, but promise me you'll lie down if you feel tired or faint."

"I will. This baby is relying on me, and I won't forget that." Her smile flickered and he squeezed her hand.

"The baby is healthy. No need to fret over him."

"Or her," she said with a little smirk. "I've never carried a babe this long. I'm not entirely certain that I'll ever feel at ease, though."

"I understand." He didn't share that he prayed each night that *this* would be the baby she got to see born into this world. And if he was being honest, he'd not only grown used to the idea of becoming a father, but eagerly looked forward to it.

She stood, and he stood with her. "Oh!" she said, her eyes widening. "I forgot to tell you. That horrible Mr. March mentioned he was friendly with Mr. Prince."

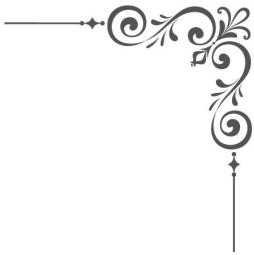
Jonathan frowned. "I'll ask Prince about it." He'd had his eye on Prince ever since the man had taken up a room, but so far, other than being rough around the edges, the man had kept to himself and caused no trouble. He hated to judge Prince by the company he kept,

but when that company attacked Jonathan's wife, it wasn't easy—or wise—to do that.

"And I'll let you do just that," Catherine said as she pushed her shoulders back.

"You don't have to fight all of your battles alone any longer." Jonathan dropped a kiss on her forehead, and Catherine's face instantly turned pink. Chuckling, Jonathan placed a hand on the small of her back as they left the room.

He would do absolutely anything to protect her, and heaven help the man who stood in his way.



Chapter Thirteen

"MMM, PERHAPS A BIT more to the left." Catherine placed her hands on her hips as she watched Jonathan steady himself on the wooden ladder and then slide the cheerful evergreen bough just slightly to the left over top of the door that led from the dining room to the kitchen.

"How about this?" he asked, twisting his head to look at her over his shoulder.

Catherine glanced at Mrs. Bell, who was threading a shiny length of red ribbon through a spray of smaller pine boughs that she'd tied together.

"Too far," was all Mrs. Bell said.

Catherine pressed her lips together to keep from laughing as Jonathan sighed and nudged the evergreen branch just slightly to the right.

"That's perfect," she said, beaming at him.

"Thank goodness," he grumbled as he climbed down the ladder.

Catherine moved forward to meet him. "Thank you. It looks lovely."

His expression softened, and she knew that if she asked, he'd hang evergreen boughs over every doorway in the boarding house.

It was such a strange feeling, knowing she had someone she could depend upon entirely. She wasn't used to it yet, and she often had to remind herself that it was perfectly fine, and expected, for her to confide her fears and worries in him.

"I suppose you'll want me to hang that too." Jonathan eyed the spray of greenery Mrs. Bell worked on.

"I think I can handle this one," Mrs. Bell replied. "It'll go on the front door."

Jonathan nodded, obviously relieved, and Catherine hid her smile with her hand. "Will you tell me more about the tree?" she asked.

He laughed as he folded the ladder and set it to the side. "What else is there to tell?"

"Just tell me all about it again." She clasped her hands under her chin, trying so hard to picture it in her mind—a tree, all lit up with candlelight and strung with baubles. "What do you put on the top again?"

He grinned at her, and she loved that he indulged her request. "A star looks nice, although I've heard of folks placing an angel at the top." He paused and glanced out the window at the chilly but sunny day. "What would you say to going out in search of a tree today?"

“Could we?” Catherine felt like a little girl, looking forward to a long-awaited excursion to town or a picnic.

“I don’t see why not, so long as it’s all right by Mrs. Bell.” Jonathan looked to the older woman, who nodded as she examined her handiwork.

“You wrap up warm, and I’ll fetch O’Rourke to let him know,” Jonathan said.

It took all Catherine had not to let out a little shriek of glee as she raced to her room. When she returned to the entryway, Mr. O’Rourke was waiting with Jonathan. He was the boarding house’s longest-running guest, and having gotten to know him, both Jonathan and Mrs. Bell trusted the man. Ever since the incident with Mr. March, Mr. O’Rourke had been more than willing to keep an eye on things when he wasn’t working.

She’d just wrapped her hand around Jonathan’s elbow when the front door opened and Mr. Prince entered. He tugged at his hat as he wished them good afternoon. Jonathan told her that Mr. Prince had been remorseful about his supposed friend’s actions, and Mr. Prince himself had been quiet enough although aloof ever since, spending much of his free time at the saloon.

While Jonathan considered asking the man to leave, Catherine had persuaded him not to. After all, it was hardly Mr. Prince’s fault that Mr. March had been a boor. She tried to tell herself she’d done the right thing, and she thought she had despite the fact that both she and Mrs. Bell had spotted Mr. Prince about town with Mr. March more than once since then.

Mr. Prince headed upstairs without incident, as usual, and Catherine let out a nervous breath. Looking up at Jonathan, all fears slipped immediately from her mind. He picked up the axe he’d taken from the shed in the rear of the building and led her through the door.

Outside, the cold air bit at her face, but the sun lent the town a cheerful air. Christmas would be here soon—the very first Catherine had ever truly celebrated since childhood. Her baby was healthy. And her affection for the handsome man at her side grew by the day.

They walked away from town toward the mountains, passing a run-down and abandoned cabin and then turning toward a copse of pines and spruce trees.

Weaving between the trunks and sinking into ankle-deep snow in the boots Jonathan had purchased for her, Catherine gazed at the trees. Most were too tall, a few were much too tiny, and then—

Jonathan stopped in front of the perfect tree. It was just slightly taller than he was, and under the snow, the needles were tinged a blue-green.

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” Catherine said, reaching out to touch

the nearest branch with her mittened hand.

Jonathan shrugged off his coat and handed it to her before beginning to chop at the tree's trunk. Catherine stood back, admiring the ease with which he accomplished the task. His dark hair fell in short waves beneath his hat, and she could almost imagine the muscles that lined his arms and chest.

Her cheeks flooded with heat at her thoughts. Here she was, an expectant mother, having such thoughts about him. Although he *was* her husband . . . She decided then that it was quite all right.

Just as the tree fell, a flutter from inside tickled her belly. "Oh!" she exclaimed, placing a hand on her stomach.

Jonathan glanced at her, his features drawn up in alarm. "Are you all right?"

Catherine's eyes widened. "I think . . ."

The flutter came again, a cross between the brush of butterfly wings and the feeling one might get after having indulged in too much food.

It couldn't be . . . could it?

She thought back to Beth's descriptions of feeling a baby's movement inside the womb. Even Mrs. Bell had spoken of the moment.

This feeling was exactly as they described.

"Catherine?" Jonathan was at her side, the tree and axe forgotten in the snow. "Tell me what's wrong."

She smiled at him, her hands trembling in joy. "Nothing's wrong at all. Everything is so very *right*."

He knitted his brows together, clearly perplexed. "Because of the tree?"

"No." She laughed. "The baby moved. At least, I'm fairly certain it was the baby. I've never felt it before."

He gazed down at her stomach, as if it were something he could see. "Are you . . .? It's not . . .?"

"It's nothing alarming," she said with certainty. Losing a baby felt nothing at all like this. "It feels almost magical. I wish I could share it with you."

Jonathan grinned. "I'm sure I'll get to feel it soon enough, once the baby is big enough to make more of a statement."

Catherine laughed. Oh, how she hoped that would come to fruition. Surely God wouldn't let her go so long with this little one only to take him or her away. But the flutter of the baby's movement matched the flutter of doubt in her stomach.

She'd be foolish not to acknowledge the possibility. Plenty of women carried babies to term, only to have them be born asleep.

Her enthusiasm tempered somewhat, Catherine watched Jonathan

wrap a rope around the end of the tree he'd cut. His face was drawn in concentration, and after a moment he looked at her. He smiled quickly, but not before she noticed the look on his face.

Whether it was fear or concern, she didn't know. And her insides twisted at the thought of leading Jonathan down this road only to have this great promise of life taken away from him.

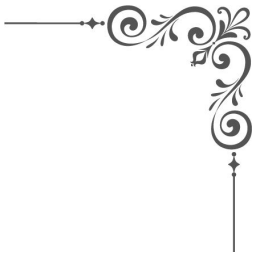
"Are you ready?" he asked, his usual smile back in place.

Catherine forced herself to send her worrisome thoughts to the back of her mind. "I am. Do you think Mrs. Bell will like it?"

"I know she will."

She fell into step behind him and the tree, watching as the branches sliced a path through the snow.

All would be well, she thought. It *had* to be.



Chapter Fourteen

THE LITTLE CHURCH SEEMED to glow with the spirit of the season, and it seemed to Jonathan that Catherine's spirit shone just as brightly. She sang along to the hymns, leading Jonathan to sing more quietly just so he could hear her.

When the service was over, Mrs. McKetrick, whose husband owned the nearest mine, turned and praised Catherine's voice. "Please, you must join our special Christmas choir," she said. "We need another lady to round out the number of men we have."

"Oh, I don't know." Catherine looked to Jonathan, clearly embarrassed at having been caught with a beautiful voice. He didn't understand her shyness, but he also didn't want to push her into something that made her too uncomfortable.

"It's your decision," he said. "Although I'd be awfully proud to have my wife singing up front in the church on Christmas Day."

"Please say you will," Mrs. McKetrick added.

Catherine's throat bobbed, and Jonathan knew she wanted to decline.

"Perhaps if you attend a rehearsal, that will help you decide?" he suggested.

Mrs. McKetrick nodded in agreement.

"Well, I suppose that won't hurt," Catherine said slowly. "It would be just like singing during a church service." She didn't sound entirely convinced, but Jonathan smiled reassuringly at her.

After a quick conversation with the doctor and another with Denzinger and his wife, they finally exited the church into a blustery morning.

"Griffin usually opens the mercantile for a few hours after church," Jonathan said. "What do you say to a little gift shopping?"

Catherine nodded. "I'd love to purchase something for Mrs. Bell. And perhaps something for Mr. O'Rourke, since he's been so helpful. And well . . ." She gave him a secretive smile.

"I can't imagine anyone else you'd like to purchase a gift for," he said. "In fact, I can't think of anyone I'd like to buy a Christmas present—"

Catherine gave him a gentle swat on the arm, and Jonathan pretended to be appalled. It was so easy to be in her company that it was difficult to remember a time when she wasn't here by his side.

It seemed a fair number of people had the same idea they did as the mercantile was busier than normal on a Sunday after church

services. Jonathan handed Catherine bills with which to use for her purchases, and then left her chatting with Mrs. Lowry as she perused ladies' toilette items.

Jonathan found what he was looking for at the counter in the rear. A shiny gold locket, oval in shape with a tiny filigree engraving of a vine, hanging from slim golden chain from a peg behind the counter.

"May I look at that locket?" Jonathan asked Mr. Griffin. The man handed him the piece of jewelry, and Jonathan held the delicate item in his palm, he knew it was perfect for Catherine. The tiny locket clasp opened to reveal room for a little photo or a lock of hair. He could imagine it nestled at the hollow of Catherine's neck

The price was about what he'd anticipated, and so, his purchase wrapped carefully in his hand, he waited outside the door for Catherine to complete her shopping. He'd come back another time to purchase other gifts, perhaps when the mercantile was less crowded.

As he watched the townsfolk walk to and fro, he wondered at the idea of having a larger sort of Christmas celebration at the boarding house. If they were already planning to have their guests, it might be fun to invite a few friends from town for Christmas dinner. Not a great number, as he didn't want to add to Mrs. Bell and Catherine's work, but some close friends. The pastor and his wife, of course, maybe the Lowrys and the Denzingers since Catherine had grown close to both of those ladies. He'd speak with Catherine and Mrs. Bell about the idea later.

"Papa, look at the train!" A young boy, maybe seven or eight, stood in awe at the mercantile window where Griffin and his wife had set out a few fine toys they'd recently received. Inside the store, a man held a tall soldier doll, but the boy's gaze was fixed on a shiny black train engine. It was not too small or too large—the perfect size for a boy of that age. Jonathan smiled as he watched, thinking that it was just the thing that would have caught his eye at that age.

"I told you not to dawdle." A slim, tall man who Jonathan presumed was the boy's father, turned and marched back to him.

Jonathan's smile fell when the man raised a hand and the boy flinched. Icy fear stung his veins as the two left, the boy running to keep up with the man. How many times had he been in that boy's position? How many times had he been thankful they were in public, because at home, there would have been no hesitation.

All of the hope and joy he carried—about Catherine, the baby, his business—all of it vanished in an instant as his mind seemed to spin backward in time. It was as if everything he'd built, the man he'd carefully made himself into, all disappeared in the face of that one scared little boy.

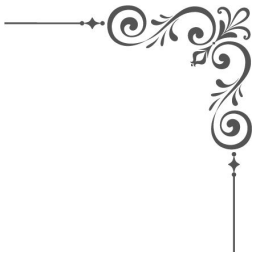
That boy would grow up, and perhaps he'd become a father to a

son or daughter. Like Jonathan's brothers, and now like Jonathan himself. Would he be the same type of father, or something different? Jonathan had seen these things repeat themselves. Even as he grew into manhood and had just begun contemplating leaving home, he remembered his eldest brother, Edward, coming to visit with his two young children. His sharp tongue and threats each time the children stepped out of line had sent eighteen-year-old Jonathan's spine rigid and his teeth on edge.

He'd vowed never to be like his father, and his brothers had done the same, so why had Edward failed?

Jonathan shoved that taunting fear away as he watched two men enter the mercantile. He should have intervened on that boy's behalf. He wouldn't fail his own child.

He *couldn't*.



Chapter Fifteen

THE HAPPY SPRUCE TREE seemed to make the parlor an even warmer warm that it already was. It was Catherine's favorite place in the boarding house. She thought she could sit for hours while the snowed swirled and whirled outside and a fire burned brightly inside, just looking at that pretty tree, all decorated in ribbon and pretty round bits of glass and strings of popcorn and dried cranberries.

She sighed now as she gazed upon it, waiting for Jonathan to emerge ready for the excursion he'd promised. Mr. Denzinger had ordered a sleigh from back East to rent out to the townsfolk to enjoy over the winter, and Jonathan had surprised her earlier by drawing up in it outside the boarding house door.

"Are you ready?" Jonathan emerged from the hallway, wrapped up in his black wool coat, a hat, and warm knit scarf. When she nodded, he held open the door and Catherine stepped out into the gently falling snow.

As he helped her into the sleigh, she thought she'd never tire of seeing the fluffy white flakes. It was mesmerizing, the way they drifted down from Heaven to land in a soft blanket upon the ground. She didn't even mind the biting cold that came with the snow's presence.

"Do you suppose this baby will enjoy the snow as much as I do?" she asked as Jonathan settled a thick blanket over their laps and took up the reins. The handsome chestnut and the sleek black horse that were to pull the sleigh stamped their feet in the snow.

Jonathan laughed. "Most children do. My brothers and I would spend hours outside, throwing snowballs and building snow forts and fashioning the snow into the shapes of people."

Catherine tried to imagine such a childhood, and she was glad her little one would get to partake in such fun. She rested a hand on her stomach as the flutter of the baby's movement came again. It was the most reassuring feeling—at least when she didn't find herself struck with fear after hours of not feeling anything at all. She was trying to grow used to the idea that this child might actually be the one she brought into the world, but the uneasiness never entirely disappeared. She didn't dare feel too comfortable, else she be taken by surprise when she lost this baby too.

She wanted this child's birth more fiercely than she'd ever wanted *anything* in her life. Each day, she thought of the things she'd happily give up if God were to grant her this one baby—as if He were in the

business of bargaining.

The sleigh sailed over the snowy road, and before Catherine knew it, they'd left Grover's Gulch behind. Jonathan had taken them in the opposite direction of the boarding house, past the livery and down the road that followed the railroad tracks for some distance before it would branch off and become engulfed in a steep mountain climb.

"This is truly the most perfect place," she said as she took in the snow-laden trees, the drifting flakes, the pristine white upon the ground, and the mountains that scraped the blue of the sky.

"I'm glad you think so," Jonathan said as the horses trotted merrily along. "Despite how rough it can be at times."

Catherine watched him as she spoke, admiring how easily he handled the horses. "Most of those miners remember their manners when they see a lady. They're good, hard-working people."

He smiled at her then and reached for her hand as he shifted the reins to his left hand. "You have the biggest heart, Mrs. Clark. To be honest, I feared that after the incident with March, you'd insist upon leaving Grover's Gulch."

Catherine laughed. "I'm tougher than that. I've faced worse in my life."

"Which is not something I like to hear, but it's something I greatly admire about you." His gloved hand squeezed hers, and she wished it were warmer—not to melt the snow, but just so they could shed their gloves and mittens and she could feel the warmth of his hand against hers.

"I don't know that I'm all that admirable," she said. "But thank you for the compliment." She paused, looking out at the pristine, white world around them and imagining Jonathan as a boy, firing snowballs at his older brothers. "Tell me more about your family. Where are your brothers now?"

"The two eldest still live in Missouri. My middle brother works for the railroad out of Chicago."

"And the fourth?" she asked.

Jonathan kept his eyes on the horses as he answered. "He passed on several years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Catherine felt as if that were something she ought to already know, but Jonathan hadn't spoken much on his family without prompting.

"It's all right. It's been some time ago now. Tom met with an accident while working as a wagonmaker." Despite his words, his expression was pained, and Catherine wanted desperately to comfort him in some way.

"Time may pass, but we never forget those we love," she said, wishing she could embrace him in a hug instead. "I'm sure you must

have many good memories of growing up with him."

Jonathan pursed his lips and said nothing for a moment. Just as Catherine started to wonder if she'd said the wrong thing, he said, "Some."

It was a puzzling response. "Was he cruel to you?" It was the only explanation Catherine could think of.

"Tom?" He shook his head. "We were close in age and the best of friends when we weren't fighting over the most pointless things."

Catherine waited for him to explain. "I don't understand," she finally said. "It sounds like you'd have many cherished memories with your brother."

"Between the two of us, yes," he said. He didn't look at her, and she knew then that his reticence to talk about his family had nothing to do with his brother.

A moment passed, and before Catherine could decide whether to ask another question, he spoke up again.

"My father wasn't the kindest man where his family was concerned. He was short-tempered and prone to taking his anger out on those he loved." He paused. "I assume he loved us, in his own way, but I honestly don't know."

Catherine said nothing. Although Harlan had never been violent toward her—he simply was never *there*—she'd wondered the same about her marriage. "It's impossible to know," she said finally. "I hope that he did, but only he and God know for certain."

Jonathan nodded. "I'm sorry to burden you with this. But sometimes I fear . . ." He halted the horses and turned toward her. "What if I'm like him?"

Catherine's eyes widened at the thought. She couldn't imagine such a thing, not from Jonathan. "It's impossible. You're the kindest, gentlest, and yet most protective man I've ever known. You're nothing like your father."

He swallowed as he searched her face. She wasn't certain what he looked for, but he finally gave her a tight smile. "I'd like to think I'm not, but I never thought my eldest brother would be either. And yet from what I know of his interactions with his own family, he's just like our father."

Catherine's heart broke. She lifted her free hand and wrapped it around his upper arm. "You *aren't*. You are not your brother nor your father. You are Jonathan Clark. You are your own man, nothing more and nothing less. Do you hear me?" She'd never believed anything so wholeheartedly in her life, and she desperately needed him to hear the words, to believe in *himself*.

He nodded, uncertain at first. "I'm torn between feeling elated about this babe and yet terrified at the same time."

She gave him a little smile. “I must confess the same.”

He lowered her hand from his arm until he was holding both her hands between them. “I don’t know how I found such fortune as to marry you, Catherine, but I’ll be grateful for the rest of my life.”

Her heart leapt into her throat at his confession. “I feel the same way,” she said.

He held her gaze another moment, and then, slowly, drew her hands closer until she was but a mere inch from him. His breath was warm on her face, and the nearness made her eyes close without her thinking about the action.

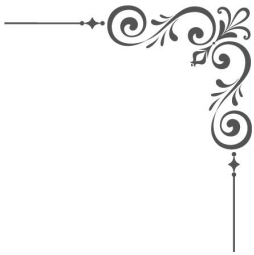
And then, just as she’d hoped, his lips touched hers. Catherine sighed into the feeling. This was all she wanted. All she needed. *Love*.

The air seemed to heat up around them as his lips explored hers, and Catherine thought she might melt the snow around them. All too soon, it was over and he’d pulled away. When she opened her eyes, he was watching her with warm, happy expression.

“We ought to get back,” he said, his eyes as bright as the snow around them.

“Not just yet.” She snuggled under the blanket, closer to him than before.

And when he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and set the horses into motion again, Catherine thought that maybe, for the first time since she was a girl, she just might be in love.



Chapter Sixteen

WITH CHRISTMAS ONLY two days away, Mrs. Bell and Catherine flew about the kitchen and the boarding house, preparing breads and cookies and ensuring the place was in order. The guests, fearful of setting a picture askew or being run down by Mrs. Bell's quick feet, made themselves scarce during the day.

Worried about Catherine being on her feet so much, Jonathan arranged for Mrs. Denzinger to come for a visit. That would, he assumed, ensure Catherine sat for at least an hour. But he was wrong, he discovered, when he found Mrs. Denizinger whiling away her visit by assisting Catherine with sending a quilt through the wash wringer.

He looked to Mrs. Bell for help. "She's going to wear herself out. Can't you convince her to take just a short rest?"

"Plenty of women work right on up until their time. I was one of them," Mrs. Bell said. But Jonathan must have looked more worried than he'd thought because she popped her hands upon her hips and gave a quick nod. "Fine. I'll send her and Mrs. Denzinger to the parlor. Perhaps I can busy them with writing out place cards for the Christmas dinner."

Much relieved, Jonathan took to his office to finish up some correspondence. Heartened by his conversation with Catherine in the sleigh, he had penned letters to his mother and each of his brothers. He touched ever-so-gently on Edward's interactions with his own children. He had no illusions that he could change his brother's behavior, but after doing nothing outside the mercantile, he felt the need to make up for that lack of action. Maybe something good would come of it.

He had just signed off on Edward's letter when a cry came from the parlor.

Jonathan leapt up, dropping his pen on the desk without a second thought to smudging the ink on the letter. The cry was distinctly female, but whether it came from Catherine, Mrs. Denzinger, or Mrs. Bell, he couldn't say.

Heart pounding, he was at the parlor in a few long strides. He reached the room at the same time as Mrs. Bell. Catherine was bent over in an armchair while Mrs. Denzinger knelt at her side.

"What's happened?" he demanded as he knelt across from Mrs. Denzinger. Catherine's face was contorted in pain, and her breathing came in ragged little gasps.

"I don't know. We were talking, and then she suddenly clutched

her stomach and cried out," Mrs. Denzinger said as she held Catherine's hand in hers.

"Is it the baby?" Mrs. Bell said from behind Jonathan.

Catherine nodded but said nothing. A tear trickled down her cheek and Jonathan instinctively reached up to brush it away.

"She ought to lie down," Mrs. Bell said. "Jenny, will you fetch the doctor?"

Mrs. Denzinger nodded, and carefully extracting her hand from Catherine's, made for the door.

"I'm going to carry you to your room," Jonathan said, trying to keep his voice even. If he let it go for even the barest fraction of a second, he wouldn't be able to contain his worry. All he could do right this moment was carry her, and so that's what he'd do.

The rest would be up to the doctor and God.

He slipped a hand under her knees and reached his other arm around her shoulders. "Hold on to my neck."

She did as he asked, tears pooling in her eyes. Carefully but quickly, he carried her to her room, where he laid her gently on the bed.

"It's happening," she said, her voice barely audible as he straightened. "The baby is . . . it's . . ."

"Ssh." Jonathan drew up a chair and sat by her side, taking her hand in his. "The doctor will be here soon. He'll know what to do." *All will be well*, he wanted to say. But he didn't know that it would.

Panic threatened to rise from the depths of his emotions, and so he fixed his eyes on Catherine. "Tell me what you feel so I can tell the doctor."

"It was a pain. Not terribly strong, but it lasted and lasted. And—oh!" She grimaced as she laid a hand on her belly.

Jonathan rested his hand on hers. *Please stay with us, little one*. He didn't know whether it was a prayer or a plea or simply a thought, but he wanted it so badly that it repeated over and over again in his mind.

After a few seconds, Catherine's face relaxed. "It's gone again. Oh, Jonathan, I don't know what's happening!" She clutched his hand with hers, squeezing his fingers.

Before he could answer, Mrs. Denzinger had returned with the doctor, and Jonathan was ushered out of the room. He paced up and down the hall until Mrs. Bell threatened to have Mr. O'Rourke remove him from the premises entirely. After that he sat on the edge of one of the kitchen chairs, watching Mrs. Bell fiddle with unnecessary but mind-occupying tasks while he imagined the worst.

After what seemed like hours but had only been minutes, the doctor emerged from Catherine's room. Jonathan leapt up as Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Denzinger flocked behind him.

“It’s nothing to worry over. Her body is merely preparing for the act of giving birth,” the doctor said as he shifted his bag from one hand to the other.

Mrs. Bell looked at Mrs. Denzinger, relief evident in both their eyes. But Jonathan wasn’t so easily convinced. “Are you certain? She’s had trouble in the past with carrying babies, and she—”

“While I’m not in the business of making promises, I can assure you that baby is as healthy as can be at this very moment.” The doctor held Jonathan’s gaze until finally, a tiny bit of relief settled into the pit of his stomach.

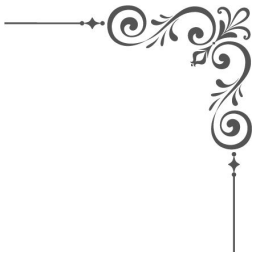
He couldn’t find words, and so he simply nodded.

“It can be tiring though, so it’s best if she lies down or remains seated for a couple of days. Something tells me she hasn’t done much of that lately,” he said as he eyed the baked goods on the countertops and little projects spread out on the table.

“I daresay she hasn’t,” Mrs. Bell replied. “But we’ll ensure that she does.”

Jonathan walked the doctor to the door, where he paid the man and thanked him. Once the doctor had left, Jonathan shut the door and leaned against it, exhaustion taking over his limbs.

Catherine and the baby represented everything that he was, everything he hoped to be. He would do everything in his power to ensure they both remained healthy—whether Catherine liked it or not.



Chapter Seventeen

"I DESPISE LYING ABOUT in bed when everyone else is working so hard." Catherine crossed her arms as Jonathan laid a tray filled with soup, bread, and cheese over her lap.

"No one else had a scare the way you did," he said, dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Now eat up. Mothers need their strength. Particularly if they hope to join the Christmas festivities tomorrow."

Catherine frowned at the steaming soup. "Mrs. McKetrick must be so disappointed that I cannot join the choir."

"She understands. Besides, I'm proud enough of you for attending the rehearsals." He took her hand, and she smiled at him. She doubted she'd ever tire of the feel of his fingers wrapped about hers.

"Thank you." It was terrifying at first, singing with a group of people small enough that her voice could be distinguished from others. But everyone was warm and welcoming, and no one faulted Mr. Byrne when he went off pitch or laughed when Mrs. Lowry's voice cracked on a particularly high note.

The fear Catherine had about someone hearing her sing and recoiling at the sound disappeared a bit more at each rehearsal. She was hardly ready to stand solo in front of the entire congregation, but at least she felt more at ease among a group.

"You could sing for me," Jonathan said.

She heard the hesitancy in his voice. He didn't want to push her, she knew that, and yet . . . he was the one who had encouraged her. He believed in her when she didn't believe in herself. And if she did mess up, Jonathan was the last person in the world who would laugh or point it out.

Catherine took a deep breath and began to sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful." Her voice was quiet and tremulous at first, and she closed her eyes, hoping that might make her feel braver. The longer she sang, the more confident she grew. When she finished the song, she opened her eyes to find Jonathan sitting back in his chair, watching her with his mouth slightly open.

"It must have either been terrible or very good," she said. "Judging from that look on your face."

"It was beautiful," he said, sitting forward again. "The best I've ever heard."

"Please, I doubt that," she said, her cheeks going warm as her fingers twisted the quilt that lay over her lap.

"I don't lie," he said, lifting a hand to caress her face. "That was

one of the loveliest things I've ever heard.

"Thank you," she said, her voice catching in her throat. She smoothed out the quilt. "I am looking forward to Christmas dinner tomorrow. And not just because I get to leave this bed. I only hope Mrs. Bell isn't overwhelmed with the preparations."

"She has everything in hand," Jonathan said. He stood and retrieved a short stack of envelopes from the nearby desk. "I'll be back soon. I need to get to the mail office before Saul closes it up for the night." He paused, looking at the envelope on the top.

"What's the matter?" Catherine asked.

"Nothing at all. After our conversation in the sleigh, I thought I might write to my family. These are the letters." He held them up for her to see.

Catherine smiled. "I think that's a wonderful idea. Perhaps I'll write my mother again tonight. And Beth too." She'd been so wrapped up in the Christmas preparations before being confined to her bed that she hadn't a moment to spare to write.

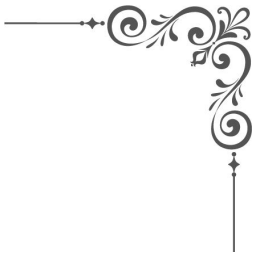
Jonathan retrieved a few sheets of paper, a pen, and some ink from the desk in the corner and set them on the little table flanking the bed. "You can use your supper tray as a desk of sorts."

"Thank you," she said, beaming him a smile she could feel to her toes.

Jonathan smiled back at her before dropping a kiss to her lips and disappearing from the room.

Catherine sat back in bed. She had so much to tell Mama and Beth. Her life was very different from what it was before, even just a few weeks ago. The baby moved as she thought about what she'd say, and she smiled.

This would be the best Christmas yet.



Chapter Eighteen

JONATHAN PAUSED BEFORE entering the church on Christmas morning. He'd been reluctant to leave Catherine behind. She looked healthy and promised him she felt well. She was, however, impatient for Christmas dinner and told him the faster he returned the faster she'd be able to rejoin the festivities. And so she'd sent him off to church with Mrs. Bell and their guests.

He glanced back down the road toward the boarding house. Something sat oddly in his mind, but he couldn't put a finger on it. Everything was well here, at the church, with townsfolk wishing each other a Merry Christmas. And he'd left the boarding house all in order with the scent of the Christmas turkey filling the rooms.

And yet the feeling didn't leave, even as the service started and Pastor Simpson preached on the meaning of the day. Jonathan glanced at the other members of the congregation, trying to discern whether they felt there was something wrong. But everyone else looked engaged in the sermon, aside from one fellow dozed in the back.

No, it was just him. Had he left something undone? Perhaps he hadn't locked the doors. Or maybe he'd forgotten to retrieve one of the gifts he'd purchased from his room to set beneath the tree.

But none of those felt like the answer to his worry. He rubbed a hand over his chin. Perhaps it wasn't any one thing in particular. Maybe it was a feeling that something wasn't quite right.

But it was Christmas. How could anything be amiss? Most of the town was here, at the church.

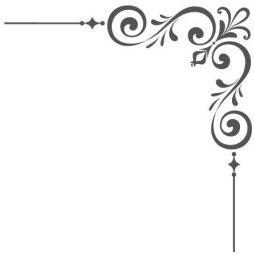
Most of the town. Not all.

Jonathan shoved his hands into his pockets and withdrew them again. Mrs. Bell gave him a questioning look. He waited a second, and then made up his mind. Leaning over to Mrs. Bell, he whispered, "I'll return in a moment."

She raised her eyebrows, clearly curious, but he didn't wait to give an explanation. Pardoning himself as he slid past other members of the congregation, he exited the church to multiple curious stares. He didn't care; he only wanted to satisfy that unrelenting feeling that something was amiss.

Outside, he strode through the sunny, cold Christmas Day toward the boarding house. Everything along the road was shuttered, its occupants in the church. A gust of wind blew and Jonathan ducked his head against it as he made his way toward the boarding house.

Everything would be fine, he told himself. He'd laugh about this feeling later.



Chapter Nineteen

CATHERINE WAS HALFWAY through a chapter of a book that Mrs. Bell had lent her when the back door to the boarding house opened with a thud. One of the men must have forgotten something.

She returned to her reading as footsteps passed her doorway. She considered calling out to the person, but figured he must be in a hurry if he had to leave church.

A crash from the dining room made her jump, her book falling to the floor. A word not fit for the ears of ladies followed the sound, and Catherine's heart thumped. *Who was out there?*

A series of thumps came echoing down the hallway, almost as if the person were opening and closing drawers. There was a clinking sound, and then the footsteps padded away.

More thumps and another crash and Catherine *knew* something was wrong.

That was no guest rummaging through the parlor.

Were they being robbed? Was this person looking for something in particular? Catherine slid from beneath her bedcovers and stood awkwardly next to the bed, her hand gripping the wooden post by the headboard as she stood on shaky legs and tried to clear her mind.

What should she do?

She could hardly go in there and confront the man, not in her state and certainly not without some sort of weapon. She glanced around the room, and her eyes landed on a splintery piece of wood near the fireplace. Letting go of the bed, she walked slowly toward the fireplace, trying to grow used to the feeling of walking again. Slowly, she scooped up the piece of firewood and stood.

She could wait here, ready in case he tried to enter her room. But if he didn't and then left, who knew what he'd be leaving with.

No, this was her business as much as it was Jonathan's, and she wasn't about to let anyone ruin what he'd worked so hard to build.

And so, with a deep breath and her nails digging into the wood, she used her toe to open her door. It opened silently—thankfully—and she ducked her head out. The hallway was empty, just as she'd suspected. The jolly greenery she, Jonathan, and Mrs. Bell had hung draped its way over doors and down the hallway.

Drawing upon every ounce of courage she had, Catherine stepped into the hallway. She could do this. She *had* to do this for Jonathan. He'd helped her so much, and she wasn't about to see his life's work ruined.

Step by step, she inched her way down the hall. She peered into the dining room—it was empty save for the table settings all askew and missing their silverware and the drawers to the china cabinet hanging open.

Catherine swallowed hard as she stared at the mess. They *were* being robbed. Someone had waited until this moment, when they believed everyone in the house to be at church, to break in. On Christmas, of all days!

She turned silently toward the entryway. No one was there, and from her vantage point, she saw no one in the parlor either. That meant the man had either left or had retreated down the hall behind the parlor that led to Jonathan's office and more guest rooms.

Redoubling her grip on the heavy piece of wood, Catherine stepped around the broken china vase in the parlor and past the open drawers of the end tables. Stepping into the hallway, she paused to listen.

When she heard nothing, she gathered every remaining ounce of her bravery and stepped forward. The first room was Jonathan's office. Just as she was about to peer inside, a bulky figure stepped out, his back to her.

Catherine stifled a gasp. The sandy colored hair that curled at the man's neck, his broad shoulders, and the hunched way he carried himself was unmistakable.

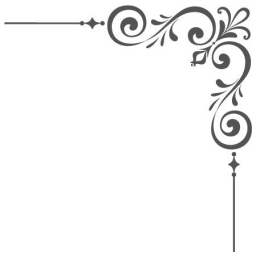
It was Mr. March.

She was sure of it, even though she couldn't see his face. As he started to turn, she regretted everything. She ought to have stayed in her room. No, she should have left. She should have gone anywhere but here. All she had was a piece of firewood. What if he had a gun? Or a knife? She was too vulnerable—and so was her baby.

A hundred thoughts crashed through her mind as he faced her, his face going from surprise to recognition to an evil grin.

It was now or never. She could strike now or find out what he might do.

Catherine gripped the piece of firewood and swung—just as the front door slammed open.



Chapter Twenty

JONATHAN BURST INTO the house, even more certain something was wrong. And when he spotted the mess in both the parlor and the dining room, there was no longer a question.

Catherine.

A *thunk* and then a grunt sounded from the hallway beyond the parlor. Jonathan raced in that direction.

There, in the hallway, stood his wife, a piece of firewood in her hand and a man lying at her feet and gripping the side of his head.

He took her in his arms as she dropped the wood. Pressing her hair away from her face, he peered into her eyes, searching for any sign of pain.

"I'm all right," she said. "But I don't know about him."

Jonathan glanced down at the man on the floor. A trickle of blood ran from between his fingers. "Is that . . .?"

"Mr. March," she supplied. "He was robbing us." She pointed at the canvas sack on the ground beside March, silverware, money, and other trinkets spilling from its opening.

"What's happened here?" Mick O'Rourke's brogue sounded from the entryway before he entered the parlor, the Carter brothers at his back. "Mrs. Clark, are you hurt?"

The men hurried across the parlor toward them. Once they were satisfied that Catherine was unhurt, they turned their attention to the man on the ground. The brothers hauled him to his feet.

"We'll take him over to the sheriff," Fred Carter said.

"Aye, he'll be out of church shortly," O'Rourke said. He turned to Jonathan. "We knew something was wrong when you left, and then Frank Prince scooted out right after. I followed him out, but he took off toward the other end of town. The boys and I thought to come here first, and I'm glad we did."

"Thank you for coming," Jonathan said, his arm around Catherine's waist. He didn't dare let go, not after what she'd been through.

"Let these boys take March to the sheriff. I'll pick up the mess if you want to see to the missus."

Jonathan nodded, thankful again for O'Rourke. If the man wasn't careful, Jonathan would wind up offering him work.

He led Catherine into his office and helped her sit down.

"I'm fine. There's no need to fret over me. I've been doing nothing but lying down lately. The exertion has done me good," she protested.

“Not that sort of exertion.” Jonathan went to the kitchen and hurried back with a glass of water. “Drink this.”

She did, and then he peppered her with questions, which, to her credit, she answered patiently.

“I’m fine, I promise,” she said when he asked yet again if she’d like to lie down. “Lying down is the last thing I want to do right now.”

“Mrs. Bell and the others should be back soon.” He finally took a seat beside her. “Are you up to having all of those people here?”

“Jonathan Clark. If you dare cancel my Christmas feast over one Grady March trying to make off with our silver, I will never forgive you.”

She looked so serious that Jonathan didn’t dare mention the idea again. Instead, he reached up and wrapped one of her curls around his finger. The deepest feelings he had in his heart rose to the surface, and suddenly, he needed her to know. “I don’t know what I’d have done if he’d hurt you. If I . . . If I lost you.”

Her eyes widened some, but she remained completely still, as if she didn’t want to disturb his train of thought.

“Catherine,” he said, weighing his words. “I don’t know what kind of father I’ll be. I hope I’m a good one. As I hope I’m a good husband to you. But I want you to know—no, I *need* you to know how much you mean to me. I know we were thrown together, although we both agreed to the arrangement, but you’re more than a woman who came in response to a request I passed on to my pastor. You’re more than simply a mail-order bride.” He drew in a deep breath, his eyes tracing each little freckle and line in her dear, beautiful face.

“I love you, Catherine,” he said finally.

Her lips formed a little o, and he hoped he hadn’t made a mistake by confessing his feelings. What if she didn’t feel the same? Worse, what if she worried he might be the same sort of man as his father, despite her protestations otherwise?

“I love you too,” she replied.

The words were simple and exactly what he needed to hear.

He grinned at her, broadly and with his whole heart. And then he couldn’t wait a second longer to kiss her again.

He crushed her to him, pressing his lips to hers, and she melted into him, her hands reaching around his neck to pull him closer. He thought he could drown here, surrounded in Catherine, and he’d die perfectly happy. He reached up to place a hand on the back of her head, his fingers lacing through the strands of her wild hair. Her warm mouth fit perfectly against his, and he wanted never to let her go again.

It was she who pulled away, just far enough to say, “I love you for everything that you are, and everything you will be.”

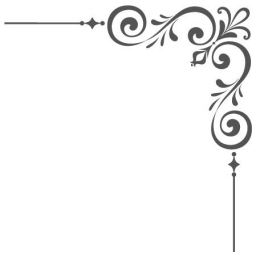
He wanted nothing more than to kiss her again, but that would get them nowhere they needed to be right at this moment, when Mrs. Bell and the others were due back at any time. So, instead, he stood and took her hand.

And then he led his wife to their parlor, where O'Rourke had already picked up the mess that March had left. They stood before the bright, pretty tree, his arms wrapped around her as she leaned into him.

"Merry Christmas, my husband," she said.

"Merry Christmas," he replied as he rested his chin on her head.

It didn't matter what came their way—robbers, grief, fear—they would handle it all, together.



Epilogue

APRIL 1871

Jonathan paced the floor of the parlor. The baby had been coming for hours now, ever since the afternoon before. How long could it possibly take something to be born?

Mrs. Bell had brought him breakfast some time ago, and yet it sat cold and untouched on the dining room table. Their guests had all gone off to work for the day, and so he was alone while Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Lowry kept watch over Catherine.

The doctor was in there now, and Mrs. Bell said that meant it wouldn't be too much longer. Jonathan surely hoped so. It felt as if he'd aged about ten years in just one night.

"Clark?" A rough voice sounded from the entryway.

Jonathan turned and spotted Frank Prince. The man was hardly recognizable now, with his hair neatly combed and his clothes clean. After the incident with Grady March, Prince had seemed to turn into a different person. He'd returned to town and apologized multiple times for March's actions, although Prince hadn't a thing to do with them. He'd then given up his frequent outings to Figaro's Saloon, had bought a new suit, and convinced Mr. McKetrick to give him a job overseeing a crew of men at the mine. He'd moved out of the boarding house and into a little home of his own he'd built just last week.

"Morning," Jonathan said as he ran a hand over his face.

Prince held something wooden in his hands, and he held it out now to Jonathan. "It's a duck," he said. "Made it myself."

"It's for the baby?" Jonathan admired the man's handiwork. The little duck had a blue ribbon around its neck and was perfect for a child.

Prince nodded as he clasped his hands behind his back. "Congratulations to you and Mrs. Clark."

"Thank you," Jonathan said sincerely.

Prince left for his work at the mine, and Jonathan set the gift on the nearest end table. A little cry sounded from their bedroom down the hall, and in an instant, Jonathan was outside the door.

"Is everything well?" he asked through the barrier that separated him from his wife.

"Perfectly!" Mrs. Bell's voice said.

Another little cry came, and Jonathan couldn't keep the smile from his face. A few agonizing moments passed, and then, finally, the door opened.

Catherine lay back against the pillows, looked exhausted but smiling, and at her side, wrapped in a blanket, was the tiniest slip of a baby.

His baby.

Jonathan rushed to her side and knelt by the bed. He laid one hand on the baby's blanket and another against Catherine's cheek.

"We have a baby girl," she said.

He leaned over and kissed her, and then took the baby into his arms. Tiny eyelids blinked, and the bluest eyes looked up at him. "She's perfect."

"And very healthy," said the doctor as he cleaned off his hands.

"She needs a name," Mrs. Bell said from where she stood with Mrs. Lowry.

Jonathan looked to Catherine.

"I confess I wouldn't let myself think of names," she said. "I was too afraid."

Jonathan looked down at the sweet girl in his arms. "My mother's name is Dorothy. And yours is Hannah. How about Hannah Dorothy?" he suggested.

She smiled and nodded. He placed the baby back at her side, and she ran a finger over little Hannah's perfect tiny face.

The other ladies and the doctor left the room, and for the first time, it was just them—a new family of three.

"Thank you for this," he said.

"I ought to be thanking you," she replied. "I can't wait until Christmas comes around again."

"So I can purchase you another piece of jewelry for your jewelry box?" he teased.

Catherine laughed and shook her head. "I thought this past Christmas was as perfect as a day could be—after the incident with Mr. March, of course—but I was wrong. I imagine all the Christmases we have in the future will be the best."

Jonathan took her hand. "I agree. And I can't wait to celebrate each one with you and Hannah."

And as he gazed down into the baby's sleeping face, he knew he would treasure his family above all else. It was impossible for him to be like his father—that much was entirely clear to him now.

He would love and cherish these two ladies, and any other children they might be blessed with, for the rest of his life. And as Catherine began to hum a lullaby to the baby, he decided nothing could be more perfect than this love he had for his family.



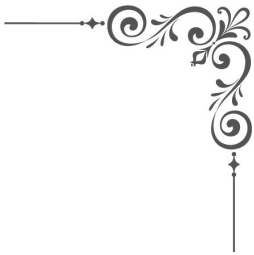
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and Jonathan's story. The next book in this series is *A Christmas Home for Hannah* by Joi Copeland.

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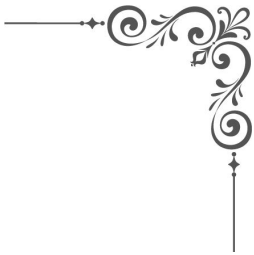
A Bride for Hawk

Keepers of the Light

The Outlaw's Promise

Mail-Order Brides' First Christmas

A Christmas Carol for Catherine



About the Author, Cat Cahill

A SUNSET. SNOW ON THE mountains. A roaring river in the spring. A man and a woman who can't fight the love that pulls them together. The danger and uncertainty of life in the Old West. This is what inspires me to write. I hope you find an escape in my books!

I live with my family and a houseful of dogs and cats in Kentucky. When I'm not writing, I'm losing myself in a good book, planning my next travel adventure, doing a puzzle, attempting to garden, or wrangling my kids.